# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A SUCCESS?: THE FUTURE GOALS AND VALUES OF AMERICAN TEENAGERS

By

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by

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I have always been one to ask questions. As soon as I learned to speak, I began relentlessly inquiring of my parents and teachers "why? and how come?" Instead of placating me with responses like "because I said so," or "that's just the way it is," my parents patiently dealt with my persistent questions and nurtured this inquisitive nature. I feel fortunate to have to have grown up during the seventies and eighties, and to have attended schools at a time when asking questions was not immediately considered a challenge to authority or disrespectful.

My academic pursuits have been driven by a curiosity to understand "why things are the way they are." I have learned to deconstruct everything from the mundane to sophisticated postulates based on empirical evidence. These discussions (whether in conversation with others or in my own mind) typically run in circles and are reduced to: "What is reality?" I have come to question the very meaning of terms and concepts typically taken for granted, and the assumptions upon which they are based.

This dissertation research grew out of a larger project on the goals and values of teenagers as emerging adults who are constructing their identities. As a first year graduate student, I was studying young peoples' expectations and aspirations for the future and found that 89% of American high school students considered "being a success" quite or extremely important. This finding was not entirely surprising, due to the focus on achievement in American society, but it raised another question in my mind, "what do they mean by 'success'?" And thus, this dissertation was born.

Throughout the research and writing process, I faced stressful situations and met many challenges. I able to make it through, only with the help and support of others. I have been contemplating the feeling of gratitude and the difficulty of expressing the depths of my thankfulness to so many people. Frankfurter expounded on the challenge to communicate appreciation, saying, "Gratitude is one of the least articulate of the emotions, especially when it is deep." I have often found myself speechless with awe at the generosity of others, and could no better describe the situation than with this quote by Steindel-Rast, "As I express my gratitude, I become more deeply aware of it, and the greater my awareness, the greater my need to express it." What is gratitude? Massieu says, "Gratitude is the memory of the heart," and Chesterton says, "I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder." There are many people to whom I would like to express my gratitude, thankfulness, and appreciation...

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For the past four years, I have had the pleasure of teaching "Marriage and Family" (which I insist on renaming "Families and Marriages") and problematizing the notion of what it means to be a family. What is a family? Does it only include persons to whom we are related through ties of blood and marriage? As a social scientist who studies families, I answer with a resounding "no." I contend that friends are the families we choose for ourselves. I would like to thank other students who have been friends to

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ..... iii

ABSTRACT ..... xi

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION ..... 1

Teenagers Today ..... 1
"Troubled Teens" ..... 1
Young People Today: a Second Look ..... 5
Generation Y: Motivated, Ambitious, and with an Eye on the Future ..... 7
Background ..... 8
Purpose ..... 9
Significance ..... 10

2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ..... 12

Defining Terms ..... 12
Adolescent ..... 13
Juvenile ..... 14
Youth ..... 14
Teenager ..... 16
Appropriate Terminology ..... 19
Theoretical Background ..... 20
Deterministic Approaches ..... 20
Constructivist Approaches ..... 23
Interactionist Approaches ..... 37
Conceptual Model ..... 42

3 METHODOLOGY ..... 44

Introduction ..... 44
Data Collection ..... 44
Quantitative Analysis of Monitoring the Future ..... 44
Qualitative Analysis of Sonlight Members ..... 49
Instrumentation ..... 57
Assumptions and Limitations of the Study ..... 57
Limitations of Monitoring the Future ..... 57

Limitations of Data from Sonlight ..... 61
Data Analysis ..... 62
4 IMPORTANCE OF "SUCCESS" AND OTHER FUTURE GOALS TO AMERICAN TEENAGERS ..... 64

Results from Monitoring the Future: Overall Importance of Future Goals ..... 67
Race and Students' Future Goals ..... 69
Father's Education and Students' Future Goals ..... 70
Mother's Education and Students' Future Goals ..... 71
Gender and Students' Future Goals ..... 71
Summary ..... 72

5 FUTURE GOALS OF YOUTH: COMPARISON OF SONLIGHT MEMBERS WITH NATIONAL SAMPLE ..... 79

Comparison of Future Goal Ratings: Overall MTF and Sub-sample ..... 79
Gender and Sub-sample Students' Future Goals ..... 80
Grades and Sub-sample Students' Future Goals ..... 81
High School Program and Sub-sample Students' Future Goals ..... 82
Expectations to Graduate from College and Sub-sample Students' Future Goals ..... 83
Goal Ratings of Monitoring the Future Sub-sample Compared with Sonlight ..... 84
Summary of Goal Rating Comparisons Between Monitoring the Future and Sonlight Members ..... 88
Trends: Changes in the Importance of Future Goals Since the 1960s ..... 89

6 HOW DO TEENAGERS DEFINE "SUCCESS"? ..... 101

Overview of Frequent Responses ..... 104
Definitions of "Success" ..... 104
Visions of "Being Successful" ..... 105
Models of "Successful" People ..... 107
Emergent Themes ..... 108
Self-Realization ..... 110
Money ..... 111
Philanthropy ("making a difference in the world") ..... 114
Work = Contributing to Society ..... 116
Connecting with Family and Friends ..... 117
Infrequent but Salient Responses ..... 119
Nontraditional Gender Aspirations ..... 119
Aspirations of Gender-Matched Parents ..... 120
Religion and "Serving Others" ..... 122
Summary ..... 123

7 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION ..... 125

Sonlight as a Values Education Program ..... 127
Overview of Program ..... 127
Focus as Values Curriculum ..... 130

Importance of Sonlight as a Values Education Program ..... 135
Case Studies Exemplifying the Effectiveness of Sonlight as a Values Education Experience ..... 136
Discussion ..... 143

LIST OF REFERENCES ..... 148

APPENDIX

A INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT ..... 158
B ORGANIZATION AND LEADERSHIP OF SONLIGHT ..... 160
C ARTICLES ABOUT SONLIGHT FROM A LOCAL NEWSPAPER ..... 163
D ACTIVITIES OF SONLIGHT: 1984-2001 ..... 164
E A SONLIGHT FOCUS: Convictions or Post-it Notes? ..... 166

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ..... 168

Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2003

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This dissertation concerns the values and goals of teenagers from a constructivist and interactionist perspective–as opposed to the vast majority of research which problematizes adolescence and focuses on juvenile delinquents. Specifically, it focuses on the future goals and values of American youth.

This research is based on Monitoring the Future, a quantitative survey of over 60,000 high school students, as well as an original study involving qualitative interviews of 70 teenagers involved in a local youth program. The data indicate that in 1999, over 89% of American teenagers considered "being a success" quite or extremely important, while only 22% of those teens said it was important to "make a contribution to society." These statistics have "flipped" since the late 1960s, when 24% of teenagers considered "being a success" extremely important and over 85% thought it important to "make a contribution to society." How do teenagers define success if it is so important to them–might this definition even include "making a contribution to society?"

Comparison of responses of the national study with those in the local sample suggests that trend data of large scale surveys tend to collapse differences and hide

niches such as those revealed by the in-depth interviews, reiterating the importance of focusing on the "small worlds" in which teenagers are involved.

Although the survey data provide telling statistics–that "being a success" is very important to young people–it does not explain *what* they mean by "being a success." The teenagers interviewed who were involved in the "small world" of a local youth program, did not define "success" as a singular concept. Instead they equated "success" with 1) an overall sense of "happiness" and achieving their goals; 2) doing well in both work and family; 3) helping others and making a difference; 4) having time to engage in activities they enjoy.

This study shows how the values of self-actualization, philanthropy, and connecting with others were cultivated in the "small world" of a youth organization. The findings suggest how other youth programs might employ a "values curriculum" and provide insight on the goals and values of emerging adults.

# CHAPTER 1
# INTRODUCTION

## Teenagers Today

The prevailing image of teenagers today is that they are deeply troubled. Both in the media and in social science research, young people are often depicted as problems and the experience of adolescence is characterized as problematic. Dominant notions, as well as academic research, tend to focus on the deficiencies and difficulties of youth rather than their assets, competencies, abilities, and goals. In this chapter, I outline these contradictory views of teenagers to show that while the notion that the majority of teenagers today are "troubled" captivates much attention, it is not an accurate depiction. Contrary to the popular perception that young people today are troubled, delinquent, and ill-prepared to enter adulthood, the vast majority (90 percent) do not experience these problems (Furstenberg 2000). Utilizing both constructivist and interactionist perspectives, I explore the future goals of American youth[1]. Specifically, I focus on teenagers as active agents, constructing their future goals and values within their "small world" experiences.

### "Troubled Teens"

When adults were surveyed and asked what words most applied to today's young people, compared with young people 20 years ago, they chose "selfish" and

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[1] Throughout this dissertation the phase "American youth" or "American teenagers" is used to refer to high school students in the United States. I realize that this terminology may be problematic, as the term "America" includes not only the United States, but other territories as well. However, I persist in utilizing the vernacular "America" as it is stated most often by the participants themselves and in the literature.

"materialistic" for the youth of today, and "patriotic" and "idealistic" for the youth of the past. The majority of Americans agree that teens today are both dangerous and in danger, silly and self-absorbed, lazy and corrupted by consumerism (Stepp 2002). Indeed, it may be hard to be optimistic about the future of the nation's youth when the prevalent images are of their violence, lack of motivation, poor performance in school, sexual promiscuities, drug abuse, and selfishness. According to popular media, "Teens are lost to heroin, engage in random promiscuity in junior high school, drink dangerously, and are just plain mean" (Males 2002b). Perceptions of this widespread deviance among youth have led to 'ephebiphobia,' an extreme fear of young people (Males 2002a).

Media headlines proclaim that violence is a problem among young people in America today. The tragic events at Columbine High School in 1999 were a wake-up call to adults, bringing attention to violence in schools and young people's relationships with their peers. In 1999, students ages 12 through 18 were victims of approximately 2.5 million total crimes at school. There were 47 school-associated violent deaths in the United States that same year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2001). In the past, violence was primarily a problem among boys. However, it seems to have become an epidemic among all teenagers, as evidenced by the attention garnered by two books that made the best sellers lists this past year: *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* and *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence*. Not only are young people committing violent acts, there is a proliferation of violence in the media. By the time a young person is 18 years old, they are likely to have witnessed over 200,000 acts of violence on TV alone. Sixty to ninety percent of all video games include violence as a prominent theme and over 1000 studies by experts have proven that exposure to

violence leads to an increase in aggressive behavior (American Association of Pediatrics Committee on Communications 1995).

Of course, teens are playing more video games, watching more TV, music videos and movies, and listening to music with censored lyrics. Young people in the U.S. spend, on average, 6.5 hours per day in front of electronic screens including televisions, computers, and video games (Woodard 2000). Eighty-two percent of youth aged 10 to 17 say they play video or computer games at home; forty-two percent play every day (National Public Radio, 2000). The average American born in the 1980s and 1990s grows up in a home with two TVs, three tape players, three radios, two VCRs, two CD players, one video game player and one computer (Kaiser Family Foundation 1999). Children spend more time sitting in front of electronic screens than any other activity besides sleeping (Annenberg Public Policy Center 1999). With all of this time spent as "couch-potatoes," these behaviors cause some adults to conclude that America's youth tend to be lazy, lacking in motivation, and that they are primarily consumers and spenders, lacking the work ethic of past generations. In 2001, youth aged 12 to 19 spent $172 billion (an average of $104 per teen each week), up 11% from $155 billion in 2000 (Teen Research Unlimited 2002). In addition, their lack of physical activity has led to a chronic problem of obesity. In 1999, 25% of children were overweight or at risk for obesity; these figures have more than doubled in just one generation (Troiano 1998).

More teenagers these days are engaging in dangerous risk behaviors than in the past. They are having more sex, using more drugs, and committing more crimes. The average age of first sexual intercourse for young women is 16 and 17 for young men. By the time they graduate from high school, fewer than 30% of young people are still virgins (Alan Guttmacher Institute 1999). In 1998, 54% of high school students said they had used drugs (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman 1998). The rise of illicit drug use,

including dangerous "date rape" drugs such as ecstacy, among teenagers more than doubled from 1999 to 2000 (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman 2000). In 1997 juvenile offenders were involved in 1,700 murders in the U.S.; 37% of high school students were involved in a physical fight (Snyder & Sickmund 1999). Almost 10% of American teenagers suffer from depression (Birmaher, Ryan, Williamson, et al. 1999), which often leads to suicide attempts. In 1997, suicide was the third leading cause of death among 10 to 24 year olds (Hoyert, Kochanek, & Murphy 1999).

Research shows that in addition to participating in dangerous risk behaviors, young people today are generally ignorant of important facts and basic information. According to the 1999 Nations Report Card study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, "one-third thought Columbus reached the New World after 1750, and the same proportion couldn't identify Abraham Lincoln. Sixty-two percent were unable to place the Civil War in the years between 1850 and 1990, while one-third had no idea what the U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown vs. Board of Education* involved. Half could not calculate the area of a rectangle, and one-third could not identify the countries the U.S. fought against in World War II. One-third did not know that the Mississippi River flows into the Gulf of Mexico, and only 20% could write a simple one-page letter to a local supermarket manager applying for a job" (National Center for Education Statistics 1999). Performance on national standardized tests has fallen over the past decade and students' workloads and understandings have been declining. In spite of these changes, however, average grade point averages have been increasing. "Three decades ago, only one college-bound high school senior in eight carried an A average. Today that figure is one in four" (Zinsmeister 1997).

**Young People Today: a Second Look**

The events of April 20, 1999, at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado drew the attention of the nation and the world. Twelve students and one teacher were killed, and more than twenty people were wounded, as two "outcast" students went on a shooting spree, finally killing themselves. In the weeks and months that followed, a debate ensued among politicians, news commentators, journalists, talk show hosts, and various "experts" as to the culprit: guns, violence, poor parenting, inattentive teachers, gangs, music, TV, web sites, or video games. Talking to the students themselves revealed a different explanation: a lack of "fitting in" or belonging, exclusive cliques, and teasing and bullying prevalent in schools and youth culture (Joos 1999).

Images of teenagers as violent and potential delinquents are common. With all the media attention focused on these events, it is easy to forget that they are isolated and exceptional situations, and not indicative of statistical outcomes or trends. In actuality, the rate of violence committed by young people in 1999 dropped 39% from its peak in 1993; serious violence by juveniles dropped 33% between 1993 and 1997, while violence among adults declined by only 25% during the same period (Snyder & Sickmund 1999). Crimes committed by youth have actually gone down, according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report. In 2000, young people committed just 5% of the nation's homicides, the lowest proportion on record (National Criminal Justice Reference Service 2000). American adults believe that juveniles cause about half of all crimes; in reality, they caused about 10-15% of violent crime (Greenwood et.al. 1998). "Ignoring clear statistics and research, authorities seem to lie in wait for suburban youth killings, months and thousands of miles apart, to validate a false hypothesis of generational disease..." (Males 1999). These pessimistic perceptions vary from the realities experienced by the majority of young people. As stated by one 18 year old student, "if the media focused on

our achievements instead of our mistakes, then we would have something to aspire to" (Howe & Strauss 2000).

The realities of the majority of teenagers in the U.S. today is that they are actually engaging in fewer "deviant" behaviors than young people of the past. According to the Commission on Adolescent Sexual Health, the average age of first sexual intercourse has not significantly changed since the 1970s. It has gone down by just about one year (Stodghill 1998). Teenage pregnancy rates have reduced sharply, falling 19% from an all-time high in 1991, and are now at record lows (Center for Disease Control 2001). Not only are they engaging in less unprotected sex, teenagers are also using fewer drugs. For the past five years, statistics have indicated that teenagers are less likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, and use marijuana or other illicit drugs. There is one exception to this trend: the use of ecstacy, which has been on the rise recently (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman 1998, 2000). Thus, it seems the media's image of the majority of young people as juvenile delinquents and potential criminals is largely inaccurate.

There is evidence that students today are actually working harder and scoring higher than students in the past. In 1997, the average time spent per week on homework was 123 minutes, compared to just 44 minutes in 1981 (Institute for Social Research 1999). The number of high school seniors taking Advanced Placement examinations (for college credit) tripled between 1984 and the late 1990s (U.S. Center for Education Statistics 1998). Mean IQ scores increased 20 points from 1932 to the late 1990s and continue to rise (Azar 1996).

Students, parents, teachers, and administrators all report that college admission standards are becoming more and more challenging, even for top students. It is no longer "good enough" to have an above average GPA. Students today are often

expected to have excellent GPAs (3.9 or above) in advanced classes, high scores on the SATs and ACTs, be involved in sports, activities, and clubs, volunteer, and show leadership qualities in order to gain college admission. Many young people report feeling stress and pressure to meet these high standards. One 17 year old student interviewed in a study said that, "Getting into college has become a tough competition because of the number of successful students in our generation. We're forced to work twice as hard just to receive the same recognition as others who used to be able to get by" (Howe & Strauss 2000).

In addition to striving to do well in school and school-related activities such as competitive sports and performances, many young people hold part-time or even full-time jobs. On any given day in the U.S. one-third of all high school students are working, and fully 80% will hold a job at some time before they graduate from high school (Mogelonsky 1998). Volunteerism, helping others, and community service are on the rise. Statistics vary, but the trends clearly indicate that the percentage of young people who report having engaged in volunteer activities increased from about half to almost 90% in the past decade (National Association of Secretaries of State 1999).

The realities of the experiences of many teenagers today may actually be quite the opposite of the prevalent stereotypes and images in the media. Arguably, the majority of youth in America make it through adolescence just fine and emerge as effective, well adjusted young adults. Millions of young people are hard working, engaged, and hopeful about their future.

**Generation Y: Motivated, Ambitious, and with an Eye on the Future**

Today, over 88 million youth make up more than one-quarter of America's population. This group of young people is known as "The Millennial Generation" or

"Generation Y" encompassing those born between 1982-2002. The vast majority of these youth are not "delinquent" and, moreover, they have been characterized as motivated, innovative, and optimistic about the future (Howe & Strauss 2000). One might think that the study of youths and teenagers would be common in the social sciences. However, a review of the leading journals on adolescence indicated that at least half of all articles were about the misbehavior or maladjustment of youth (Furstenberg 2000). Often, the existing literature approaches adolescence as a problematic life stage in modern society and casts teenagers as potential problems. Furstenberg emphasizes the great need for research that provides a rich description of the actual lives of teenagers: how they experience, perceive, and organize their social world. Too little recognition has been paid to the obvious fact that most youth make it through adolescence quite well. We know little about the competencies of these young people. Thus, there is a great need for research on young people's values and aspirations for the future.

**Background**

This project and my interest in this area actually began about 10 years ago when I was in high school. I was observing the social interactions at my high school: the "popular" kids, the "band nerds," the "hippies," the "skaters," the "rejects," etc. There were especially poignant scenes, such as lunch time, where we negotiated where to sit and who to be "seen" with–it all seemed to matter so much! I found myself not only participating in these "negotiations," but also deeply interested in them, analyzing them on somewhat of an intellectual level. As an undergraduate, I studied psychology, sociology, and women's/gender studies in hopes of shedding light on these issues–that is, the experiences of teenagers. What I found instead were the theories of "experts"

that did not at all fit what I had experienced as a teenager, or what I had observed in my later interactions with high schoolers. From 1994-2001 I was an intern with a local youth organization of more than 150 teenagers. During my internship I spent about 10 to 20 hours per week with the organization and facilitated a small discussion group of 12-15 girls.

In my first year of graduate level research methods, I began a quantitative analysis of a large probability data set called *Monitoring the Future* (MTF). MTF is often cited in the popular media for its statistics on drug use, though it actually includes a wide range of variables and explores changes in important values, behaviors, and lifestyles of contemporary American youth. I was interested in the future aspirations and expectations of American teenagers. The study I conducted at that time was concerned with the increasing "pressure" on high school students. It seemed that students were faced with extremely high expectations: to have high GPAs, excel in at least one sport, and be involved in multiple extracurricular activities. This phenomenon has since been backed up by the literature in school counseling. I had planned to use these data for my master's thesis, but ended up doing a rather timely project on Columbine, as I was privileged to travel to Littleton with 70 teenagers. While in Colorado, I interviewed them about social pressures in high school and their reflections on the tragedy at Littleton.

**Purpose**

In this dissertation, I examine the future goals of American youth, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. I begin with a quantitative analysis of *Monitoring the Future* (1999) to see with what importance teenagers rate various life goals. Results from the 1999 MTF indicate that over 89% of American teenagers consider "being a success" quite or extremely important–where only 22% of those teens said it was important to "make a contribution to society." Unfortunately, large scale surveys such as

MTF do not provide information about the ways in which teenagers define success. To address this gap in the literature, I supplement the data available in the MTF with information drawn from in-depth interviews with members of a local youth organization.

**Significance**

Very little sociological attention has been focused on the experiences of youth that are not considered juvenile delinquents, according to the distinguished family sociologist, Frank Furstenberg (2000). Furthermore, there has been essentially no research on white, upper-middle class, college-bound teenagers and how these young people construct their adult identities. Furstenberg states that much of the existing literature on youth focuses on "juvenile delinquents" and treats the lives of teenagers as potentially problematic. He emphasizes that there is a great need for research that provides a rich description of the actual lives of teenagers: how they experience, perceive, and organize their social world, focusing on their positive attributes and roles as agents.

Specifically, I hope that this study will provide insight into the ways in which young people construct their goals and values and how these constructions might be influenced through their "small world" experiences. There are few works in sociology or the social sciences that explicitly utilize a "small worlds" approach, though this perspective is especially advantageous when exploring the experiences of youth. "Small worlds" is a phrase coined by West and Petrik (1992). Their premise is that the interactions of young people occur within a variety of seemingly separate but often overlapping and interconnecting "small worlds," including but not limited to their family, friends, school, and other groups and various other assemblies and settings. I extended the notion of "small worlds" to explain the orientation of this dissertation research. In

addition to the obvious three (family, school, and peers), young people in contemporary American society experience "small worlds" in each of the sports, activities, clubs, organizations, and programs in which they are involved. Sonlight operated as one such "small world" in which the youth interacted and constructed their own definitions of "success," goals for the future, and values (ideas about what is important in life).

# CHAPTER 2
# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

## Defining Terms

A number of terms are used synonymously with the words "teenager" for labeling young Americans. "Adolescent," "juvenile," and "youth" are three such terms common in the academic literature. Other words, such as "high schooler" and "student" are also often heard. Some terms seem so noticeably inappropriate that it may seem redundant to address them. However, I feel it is important to define my population of interest (and alternative conceptions) as precisely as possible. Before discussing the terms I use to define the population of my research, I would like to review alternative concepts, and why I consider them to be problematic.

Although seldom used, the phrase "young person" is too broad. Depending on the context, it could be used in reference to a child in elementary school or a middle-aged adult (if, for example, the speaker was an elderly individual). The words "kid" and "child" are technically correct if it is a parent who is speaking about their own offspring. However, many youth over the age of 12 or so become rather offended when called "kids," interpreting it as an insult, meaning "immature." According to a 1990 Gallup poll, 71% of American 13-17 year olds said it was "not acceptable" to describe persons of their own age as "children" or "kids." It would be accurate to use the words "highschooler," "high school student," or "student," but they are also flawed. "Highschooler" is not grammatically correct, as indicated by the spell-check on the computer and a professor's red pen. "High-school student" and "student" are both

precise terms; however, they are too specific because they ignore other roles or identities (such as friend, athlete, family member) and seem to reduce individuals to their educational status.

Adolescent, juvenile, youth, and teenager each capture certain aspects of, and share much similarity, with each other, but they also tend to exclude essential qualities or carry their own distinct connotations. The term "Gen Y" or "the Millennials" is not included on this list because they were generally aschewed by the youth with whom I worked. I will explore the notions of adolescent, juvenile, youth, and teenager below, discussing which is most appropriate for usage in this study.

**Adolescent**

"Adolescent" is most often used by psychologists to speak of individuals who are within a period of development that precedes maturity, and by sociologists and anthropologists to speak of a period between physical and social maturity. Though there is disagreement as to exactly when this term was coined– whether credit goes to Artistotle, Rousseau, or if it is a modern invention--it gained salience and notoriety at the turn of the twentieth century. In the 1904 tome, Adolescence: Its Psychology, and It Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education, G.S. Hall promoted the notion of adolescents as incompetent, troubled, half-mad, and dangerous, along with the stereotype of having "raging hormones." This stereotype of adolescents promoted by Hall, as an "expert" has a veneer of being accurate and unquestionable, and becomes essentialized. I find such stage theories to be problematic and will detail this in a later section of this paper. Accordingly, I generally avoid the term "adolescent" unless speaking specifically of developmental experiences.

**Juvenile**

Juvenile is not used as often in common speech as the other terms, but according to the Merriam Webster dictionary, the noun juvenile refers to a "young person; youth." However, the term is usually paired with the word "delinquent" to form the phrase "juvenile delinquent" and thus frequently carries connotations of deviance. Actually, the term "juvenile delinquent" was coined by social workers in the early twentieth century. Platt (1969) explained that it part of an early effort to save children from themselves, as older generations have always viewed younger generations as a threat and something to be feared. Thus, I avoided use of the term juvenile in order to avoid associations or inferences to deviance.

**Youth**

Youth is a broad term, but it answers the question, "if none of the aforementioned terms are appropriate, what term should be used?" How should one best conceptualize this population? Youth? There are inadequacies with the word "youth" but at least it is not associated with such negative concepts as are juvenile and teenager. Some would assert the term is too broad, however.

In America and other industrial societies the distinction between youth and adolescence is often blurred. Some social scientists further complicate the matter by ascribing their own highly specific definitions to the term. For example, Keniston (1968) studied the increasing numbers of young people who experienced particularly delayed entry into adulthood. He coined the time between adolescence and adulthood "youth," applying it specifically to those aged 18 to 26. The label "youth" in this context was applied by Keniston to the growing segment of America's young who are highly talented, affluent, and educated, but who have not yet assumed the roles and responsibilities of

"adulthood." He hypothesized that these young individuals prolong experimentation with life's possibilities and their personal potentials. Their identities are tied up with a generation and not with a tradition. Since generations succeed each other quickly, these individuals stuck between adolescence and adulthood are worthy of study as such "youth." This is further complicated because Roszak (1976) called this same youth culture "counterculture" thus attributing even more connotative meanings to the concept. It is important to note how "youth" has been literally loaded with these other notions. The choice of term should be governed by the nuanced meaning one is trying to communicate. As commonly used, the term youth has an inclusive connotation (Sebald 1992).

From a sociological perspective, individuals can be defined in terms of their status within society as indicated by their self-sufficiency; these young people are not self-sufficient, and thus, according to this perspective, they are not adults. Yet they are not completely dependent, and are thus not children either (Bakan, 1971). "Youth" and "adolescence" have both been used to refer to a transitional period between childhood and adulthood. The markers indicating both its beginning and end are ambiguous. When exactly does childhood end: with the completion of elementary school, with the start of puberty, or at age thirteen? It could be any one of or none of these markers for different individuals. The end of this period is just as unclear: when one graduates from high school, at age 20 when one is no longer a teen, as early as 13 or 14 when puberty is complete and one is able to have a baby, or at age 18 when one is legally an adult? Legally, adulthood begins at age 18, when persons are no longer sheltered by protections enacted for "minors." However, as social scientists (such as Bakan 1971, Côté 2000, 2002, Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider 2000, Elkind 1998, Furstenberg 2000, Schneider & Stevenson 1999,) suggest, complex social conditions in the United States ,

including the attendance of college becoming a more normative experience, necessitated the prolongation of childhood, thus delaying adulthood.

Industrialization also created a shift in the distribution of the population from rural to urban. Large numbers of young people, of the same age, became concentrated in one place. Furthermore, a growing middle class made it possible for parents to send their children to schools (where there were more students than the "one-room schoolhouse," divided in class by age) in order to prepare them for the better jobs that were becoming available. The first high schools in the U.S. were in the industrial, urban centers in the early 1900s. The youths who attended them were a recognizable group.

More recently, especially with the post-World War II baby boom, the time of transition into adulthood has become even more delayed. Some social scientists contend that this "long goodbye" phenomenon has a number of underlying factors related to the "baby buster" generation. The high cost of living, coupled with diminished earning power, is resulting in a significant increase in the average age at which individuals leave home. Thirty five percent of young men in their twenties still live with their parents (Zill & Robinson 1995).

Even among current researchers who agree that adolescence exists, the age at which they believe it to end and begin varies dramatically. Cobb (1997) contends that adolescence is the period from age 13 to age 19. Sebald (1992) holds that adolescence begins with puberty and ends at age 18, with legal adulthood. Zill and Robinson (1995) insist that adolescence continues well into the twenties, and ends sometime after the individual finally leaves home.

**Teenager**

"Teenager" is a term that was first coined in a 1941 article in *Popular Science* magazine (Hine 1999, p. 8). The word came into use during World War II and was in the

title of a book by 1945. It seems to have leaked into the language from the world of advertizing and marketing, where demographic information was becoming an increasingly important part of predicting which sales approaches were most effective with particular buyers. References to a person in his or her teens had been part of the language since the 1600s. But such references had always been used to describe individuals. With the rise of the industrial era, during the late 1800s and early 1900s, large groups of people became increasingly identified by single characteristics. People aged 13 to 19 became "teens" or "teeners" or "teen-agers." After World War II, they were largely in the same place, high school, sharing a common experience, and were young and open to new things. They were in short, easy to sell to (Hine 1999) In age-graded societies, people are classified by chronological age and are assumed to be similar on many important dimensions.

The term "teenager" is especially problematic because it is imbued with a sort of mystique that is full of conflicting ideas. Teenagers seem to occupy a special place in our society. They are envied and sold to, studied and deplored. The teenage years have been defined simultaneously as both the best and freest time of life and a time of near madness and despair. Our beliefs about teenagers are deeply contradictory: They should be free to become themselves. They need many years of training and study. They know more about the future than adults do. They know hardly anything at all. They ought to know the value of a dollar. They should be protected from the world of work. They are frail and vulnerable figures. They are children. They are sex fiends. They are the death of the culture. They are the hope of us all (Hine 1999). The very qualities that adults find exciting and attractive about teenagers are entangled with those we find terrifying. According to Hine (1999) the energy of a teenager can be perceived as threatening anarchy. Their physical beauty and budding sexuality intimidate moral

standards. Their assertion of physical and intellectual power makes their parents both proud and aware of their own aging and mortality at the same time. These qualitites, the things we love, fear, and know about the "basic nature of young people," constitute a mystique: a seductive but damaging way of understanding young people. This encourages us to see teenagers (and youths to see themselves) not as individuals, but instead as potential problems (Black 1999, Hine 1999).

Most people treat teenagers as some self-evident phenomenon, an unavoidable stage of life (Black 1999, Hine, 1999). Adults both lament and fondly recall their teenage years. Children are encouraged to look forward to being teenagers. Yet the concept of teenager remains both arbitrary and confusing. The word "teenager" tells us only that the person is older than 12 and younger than 20. This seven year period represents an enormous component of a person's life, one in which most of us experience physical, emotional, intellectual, and social changes. The word "teenager" actually hides tremendous differences in maturity and the experiences of members of the age group, and it masks the differences within individuals as they pass through their teen years.

The trouble with creating a distinct group defined solely by age is that we conjure up phenomena that do not really exist and essentialize or reify those that do (Black 1999, Hine 1999). We tend to make assumptions about an entire group of people based on the actions or characteristics of a few. For example, in both the 1950s and the 1990s there was much in the popular press about an epidemic of youth violence, when the actual rates were declining. Today's teenagers almost seem to serve a sentence of presumed immaturity, regardless of their achievements or abilities. Furthermore, teenagers spend much of their lives (eight hours a day in school alone) dealing with people who often do not know them as individuals and under the control of institutions that strive to deal with them uniformly.

At most, we can say that a "teenager" is a social invention that took shape during the first half of the twentieth century, not some objective reality. I would assert that remnants of this "mystique" remain. In our time, teenagers are often judged to be less able than they are (Furstenberg 2000). The concept of the "teenager" seems to be a sort of impediment that keeps youths from becoming the people they are ready to be.

**Appropriate Terminology**

In this dissertation, I resolve this dilemma of terminology by deferring to the term that the members of the population themselves prefer and utilize most often: "teenagers." Depending on the context or situation, they will often rely on phrases such as "youth," "young people," "high-schoolers," and "students" to refer to themselves and other members of this group to which they belong. Using the language of the group members puts their experience at the center instead of imposing the preconceived notions of the researcher upon the participants and their lives (Holstein & Gubrium 2000). According to Holstein and Gubrium's interactionist perspective, it is important to pay attention to *how* and *what* people use as they talk themselves into being. This is also consistent with feminist perspectives that assert the importance of using the language currently being embraced because that is part of a reclaiming effort and part of a construction of oppositional knowledges (Collins 2000). Interestingly, a nationally representative survey indicated that the preferred terms that most American teenagers use to call themselves include: "teenagers," "young adults," "teens," "young men and women," "youth," and "adolescents" (Gallup 1990).

In an effort to avoid being redundant and repetitive, 'teenagers,' 'youth,' 'young people,' and 'high school students' will be used somewhat interchangeably when referring specifically to the participants of this study. However, the use of 'adolescent'

and 'juvenile' will be avoided. Additionally, when discussing issues of gender, I will not use "young women" and "young men" as frequently seen in the literature, nor the term "boys," as is common in educational settings. I have observed both of these options to have "chilling effects" when working with teenagers. Instead I will again rely on the terms that the participants themselves utilized: "girls" and "guys." Not all teenagers may prefer these terms, however, within the "small world" of Sonlight, consisting of white, privileged high school students, they were the words of choice. In many circles, the usage of the term "girls" when referring to (young) women is not considered as diminutive as it was in the past. According to Baumgardner and Richards (2000, p. 52), "calling an adult woman 'girl' was once insulting, like calling and adult black man 'boy.' But now that we can choose and use the word ourselves and not have it forced on us, "'girl' is increasingly rehabilitated as a term of relaxed familiarity, comfy confidence, the female analogue to 'guy' and not belittling."

## Theoretical Background

Throughout the 20th century, a number of theories have emerged about children and youth which can be categorized into three types: determinist, constructivist, and interactionist. In this section, I will appropriate the theoretical explanation outlined by Corsaro in his "Sociology of Childhood" (1997) to discuss these three major approaches to studying childhood and youth in the social sciences, outlining the advantages and disadvantages of each. I will explain how I employed both constructivist and interactionist approaches in this work. I will also discuss the potential benefits of a fully interactionist approach, endorsing its use in future research endeavors.

### Deterministic Approaches

Much of traditional theorizing about youth was from a deterministic perspective. This includes the aforementioned work by G.S. Hall, as well as Coleman's Adolescent

Society. Deterministic models of youth focus on the process of socialization, characterizing the young person as a passive being who is largely being guided and shaped by society in order to be a functioning member. This model tends to be individualistic, calling out the ways in which young people are appropriated by society. An advantage of these early theories of youth is that they legitimized the study of young people within the social sciences and were ground breaking, opening the door to this field of study.

**"Adolescent society"**

In 1951, James Coleman published The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and its Impact on Education. The research was conducted between 1957 and 1958. Coleman originally conceived of the project in the early 1950s after reading A. B. Hollinshead's *Elmstown's Youth* (1949), a ground breaking study of youth culture and cliques. According to Coleman, there were two reasons why he engaged in his study: First, a deep personal concern for the "better functioning" of high schools; and second, an interest in different kinds of status systems, particularly the distribution of status and the consequences and rewards of given systems. Coleman's structural-functionalist standpoint becomes evident. According to Coleman's opening statement, "Educating its young is probably a society's second most fundamental task- second only to the problem of organizing itself to carry out actions as a society. Once organized, if a society is to maintain itself, the young must be so shaped as to fit into the roles on which the society's survival depends." He sets out to describe his project as objectively making evident the ways in which society goes about this aforementioned task, with funds from the U.S. Department of Education, by surveying ten midwestern schools.

Coleman describes adolescents of the time as being shaped entirely by their

surroundings, mere players of an ascribed role. The following passage is representative of Coleman's descriptions of "adolescent subculture."

> This setting-apart of our children in schools... He [sic] is "cut off" from the rest of society, forced inwards towards his [sic] own age group, made to carry out his [sic] whole social life with others his [sic] own age. With his [sic] fellows, he [sic] comes to constitute a small society, one that has most of its important interactions *within* itself, and maintains only a few threads of connection with the outside adult society. In our modern world of mass communication and rapid diffusion of ideas and knowledge, it is hard to realize that separate subcultures can exist right under the very noses of adults- subcultures with languages all their own, with special symbols, and most importantly, with value systems that may differ from adults. Any parent who has tried to talk to his [sic] adolescent son or daughter recently knows this, as does anyone who had recently visited a high school for the first time since his [sic] own adolescence. To put it simply, these young people speak a different language. What is more relevant to the present point, the language they speak is becoming more and more different (Coleman, 2).

Coleman views adolescent subculture as deviant because it goes against what he perceives to be the natural order of the world. Coleman seems to imply that the "adolescent subculture" he described is problematic, as if there was something inherently wrong with youths associating with one another. He explains that the education of adolescents is a "normal process" yet he seems to think that the trend during his time, of an increasing amount of time spent at school, is adverse. His concerns largely echoed those of Talcott Parsons, an oft cited functionalist: young persons are a threat to society, they must be trained to conform.

Deterministic models of childhood and youth consider young people as potentially functioning to maintain and sustain the social order, yet these theorists view youth as a sort of "'untamed threat', who must be controlled through careful training" (Corsaro 1997, p. 9). Weaknesses of the deterministic model include an overemphasis

on the outcomes of the process of socialization while discounting the active and innovative capacities of young people. In addition, it tends to ignore issues of contextuality (historical and local specificity), instead inferring that interaction occurs in a vacuum of sorts. I adopt Corsaro's sociology of childhood to critique such deterministic models of youth that were dominant in the U.S. throughout the first half of the twentieth century in order to assert that these abstract models simplify highly complex processes, and overlook the importance of youth in society (Corsaro 1997, p. 10). Hall, Coleman, and other determinists tend towards a reductive approach, considering the activities and interests of youth to be inconsequential or nonfunctional. They tend to ignore or are dismissive of the idea that young people do not just internalize society, they are active beings and, as such, can even bring about positive changes.

**Constructivist Approaches**

During the 1960s, constructivist approaches to youth studies emerged as an alternative to the essentialist deterministic models. Constructivist perspectives address the issue of the young person as an active agent, much more so than did the functionalists of the deterministic model. In terms of the issues explored in this study, constructivist theories are a preferable option to deterministic models; however, they have some drawbacks which make them less than ideal. Constructivist approaches, as typified by developmental stage theorists will be discussed below.

**Developmental stage theories**

Developmental stage theories share many of the same assumptions about the role of young people purported by the determinists. They focus on the process of development from childhood to adulthood as unilateral. Much developmental stage theorizing is from the discipline of psychology, explaining that young people are

"shaped" by behaviorism, reinforcement and punishment of their actions. In this section, I will briefly discuss the major developmental stage theorists including: Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, and Gilligan, and their approach to studying youth. I will place particular emphasis on the ways in which they explain young peoples' values, under the rubric "moral development." The developmental stage theories of Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, and Gilligan are theories about the development of young people and are constructivist in orientation. Beginning with Piaget, these theories were the first to systematically study human intellectual development. Erikson built upon Piaget's work and generated a theory of adolescence as a moratorium period of identity search. He said it was a time when young people explore their identities–their ideas, ideals, and goals for the future. Kohlberg derived his theory of moral development from the basic stages of human intellectual development delineated by Piaget, focusing on the question of how people make their decisions about "right" and "wrong." Gilligan was a student of Kohlberg who criticized his work for being based entirely on the experiences of men, and its culturally bound assumptions. She developed a theory that took gender into consideration and emphasized the ways in which people care for each other rather than compete. Some developmental stage theorists have come to recognize, but do not emphasize, the active role of young people, organizing and constructing their world. They also ignore the contextuality of such interactions, unlike interactionists, who make this their starting point. These developmental stage theorists share a set of constructivist assumptions which function as limitations and thus lead to the conclusion that an interactionist perspective is the best framework for the current study, though there were methodological limitations to the extent to which it was employed, as discussed later.

**Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development.** Piaget has been recognized as the founder of stage theories of development. He integrated biology and the study of

knowledge to form a theory of children's intellectual development, explaining that cognitive capacities in humans develop in a series of stages. Piaget asserted that beginning at birth, humans interpret, organize, and gather information about their environments to construct conceptions of their physical and social worlds. He believed that young people do not merely accumulate facts and skills at random, instead, they progress through a series of qualitatively distinct stages of intellectual ability. Piaget reminds us that the cognitive perceptions of children and young people can be very different from those of adults. He theorized that people progress though four stages, according to their age: birth to age 2, sensorimotor; age 2-7, preoperational; age 7-14, concrete; and age 14-adulthood, postoperational. Piaget held that as children age, they naturally gain more cognitive ability and begin to see things from perspectives other than their own, and that once they progress to the last of the four stages, they will be able to think abstractly. This sequence is useful because it describes the way that reasoning develops for most people, emphasizing young people as actively promoting their own intellectual development.

| Approximate Age Range | Stage | Typical Developments |
|---|---|---|
| Birth to age 2 | Sensorimotor | Children develop the concept of object permanence and the ability to form mental representations. |
| Age 2 to 7 | Preoperational | Children's thought is egocentric; they lack the concept of conversation and the ability to decenter. |
| Age 7 to 11 | Concrete Operations | Children can decenter; they acquire the concept of conversion; but they cannot reason abstractly or test hypotheses systematically. |
| Starts at age 11 or 12 | Formal Operations | Children begin to reason abstractly. |

Figure 1–Piaget's Stages of Intellectual Development

Piaget's work is particularly relevant to this study because in his early writing, he focused specifically on the moral lives of children, studying the way children play games in order to learn more about their beliefs regarding right and wrong (Piaget 1932/65). According to Piaget, all development emerges from action; that is to say, individuals construct and reconstruct their knowledge of the world as a result of interactions with the environment. Based on his observations of children's application of rules when playing, Piaget determined that morality, too, can be considered a developmental process (Piaget 1932/65). Piaget theorized that during the concrete stage, children have a "dualistic morality," seeing things as only right or wrong, as they are primarily concerned with classification as a task of reasoning. Once they progress to the formal stage, they are able to move from a dichotomous view of social rules, morals, and values to one where they incorporate the views of others with their own. Weaknesses of Piaget's theory include: the assertion that development occurs linearly, in one direction, from one distinct stage to the next; the assumption that development is primarily individualistic, ignoring its collectivity and contextuality; an underestimation of the role of the environment, where each child is viewed individualistically in their discovery and development of capacities; and that the instruments utilized by Piaget were culturally specific, dependent upon exposure to western schooling.

**Erikson's Theory of Identity Development.** Erikson was a colleague of Piaget who generated a model of human social development. Erikson's theory of development is useful in that it addressed the notion of continuity and transitions instead of emphasizing the discrete boundaries between stages. He draws connections between early childhood experiences, noting their effect on the young person's continued development (where Piaget tended to speak of intellectual capacities as just emerging

from within the person at certain ages). Erikson also attempted to account for the importance of social interaction and how relations with others stimulate personality development throughout the life course. He outlined a series of eight stages through which human development progresses: age 0-1, Trust/Mistrust Stage; age 2-3, Autonomy/Doubt Stage; age 3-6, Initiative/Guilt Stage; age 7-12, Industry/Inferiority Stage; age 12-18, Identity/Identity Diffusion Stage, late teens-early twenties, Intimacy/Isolation Stage, age 20-60, Generativity/Stagnation Stage; age 60 and beyond, Integrity/Despair Stage.

Erikson was especially interested in and emphasized adolescence, the "identity/identity diffusion stage," which he said occurred naturally from ages 12-18. He said that adolescence was a moratorium period in which youth may find their identities and, only after successfully accomplishing this task, may progress on to adulthood. According to Erikson (1968) adolescence is the period in one's life when choices are made and identities are formed. It is through this process that peer groups, cliques, and subcultures flourish. Central to this period is the choice of a future career (Epstein 1998). In addition to its linear, one-way model of progression, Erikson's theory has been criticized for being an idealized description of developmental patterns with an inadequate explanation of individual differences. I assert that another weakness is his construction of youth ("adolescence") as necessarily a time (he called it a "moratorium period") in which young people feel angst and alienation for the future. This has the effect of discounting their abilities and roles as agents, capable of accomplishments.

**Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development.** Kohlberg was a contemporary of both Piaget and Erikson who modified and elaborated Piaget's work. His theory is often recognized for laying the foundation for the debate within the social sciences on moral

development. Though notions of morals, values, and goals were components of Piaget's and Erikson's theories, Kohlberg was the first to delineate stages of moral development. Consistent with Piaget, he proposed that people form ways of thinking through their experiences, including understandings of moral concepts such as justice, rights, equality, and human welfare. Kohlberg extended Piaget's formulation to include adolescence and early adulthood, and determined that the process of attaining moral maturity took longer and was more gradual than Piaget had proposed. He maintained that each stage consisted of a unique conceptualization of the requisites of social interaction, with each successive stage exhibiting greater cognitive complexity and a greater range of perspectives taken into account (Sunar 2002). Kohlberg's six stages of moral development are summarized in the table below.

| Approximate Age Range | Stage | Developments |
|---|---|---|
| Birth to 9 years | Preconventional<br>1. Punishment and Obedience<br>2. Instrumental Hedonism | Decisions based on self-interest |
| 9 to 20 years | Conventional<br>3. Interpersonal Concordance (seeking approval)<br>4. Law and Order | Decisions based on opinions of others |
| Age 20+ | Postconventional<br>5. Social Contract<br>6. Universal Ethical Principle | Decisions based on self-legislated, self-imposed universal principles |

Figure 2–Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

According to Kohlberg, as people progress through the stages they are less likely to make moral decisions based only on their own perspective, instead taking into account the perspectives of others and the impact that their own actions might have. In

the preconventional stage, moral decisions are egocentric and the reasoning upon which they are based is in terms of getting rewards and avoiding punishment. The conventional stage is based on the ability to take into account the perspectives of others, and the postconventional stage occurs when a person is able to make "universal" decisions, which, according to Kohlberg, are not culturally bound. In this model, youth are members of the conventional stage, where they make decisions in order to gain or avoid approval, and out of emotions of duty and guilt.

Kohlberg's theory has been criticized for numerous weaknesses. Implicit is an assumption that teenagers are too young to achieve the ability to make moral decisions based on their effects on others and overarching (so called "universal") standards. Though he and his students conducted extensive interviews with children, youth, and adults, presenting them with situations and asking them their reasons for the moral decisions they made, his sample was remarkably limited. First, Kohlberg implied that the sequence of his six stages was invariant even though evidence suggests that people can and sometimes do regress with age (Peta 1999). He does not offer an explanation for how or why people progress through the stages. Additionally, Kohlberg places too much emphasis on individual thought processes and fails to take into account the importance of social interaction. As such, it is more a theory of moral reasoning than of moral behavior. Contemporary research has found that more people than Kohlberg estimated are able to make decisions based on the principle of universal morality if they are asked to recognize instead of generate responses (Peta 1999). Finally, Kohlberg's theory of moral development was based largely on the experiences of boys and men, all of whom were white Americans. Kohlberg's theory has significant limitations in that it

makes "universal" conclusions based on a select group of participants who are not

representative in terms of their gender, race/ethnicity, nor socio-economic status.

**Gilligan's Theory of an Ethic of Care.** Carol Gilligan was a student of Kohlberg. She was particularly taken with a stage theory approach of moral reasoning. However, she disagreed with some of Kohlberg's underlying assumptions about the context of peoples' decision making. From her own experiences as well as patterns in data she gathered, she found that womens' moral reasoning was often based on criteria other than those included in Kohlberg's theory. For example, in Kolhberg's fourth stage, he indicates that decisions are based on duty and guilt; yet Gilligan (1992) found that women in this stage were thinking more about what the most caring thing to do would be, rather than doing what the rules required of them. Gilligan asserted that it was not that women were less morally developed than men (as they often scored lower on Kohlberg's test than did men), but rather that they possessed a different sequence of moral development. Women's morals were more likely to be focused on social interaction (connection versus separation with others) instead of rules and competition.

| Age | Stage |
|---|---|
| not listed | Goal is individual survival |
| Transition: from selfishness → to responsibility to others | |
| not listed | Goodness is equated with self-sacrifice |
| Transition: from goodness → to truth (honesty & integrity) | |
| maybe never | Principle of of non-violence (do not hurt self or others) |

Figure 3–Gilligan's Stages of the Ethic of Care (Huff, 1998)

Thus, Gilligan created a theory of moral development that emphasized an ethic of care. In doing so, she challenged the assumption that there is only one dimension of moral reasoning. Additionally, she connected the process of moral decision making to concerns about individual selves and the social context in which they live (Huff 1998). As

a constructionist, she continued to focus on outcomes rather than the interactions themselves.

**Critiques of developmental stage theories**

The four developmental stage theories mentioned above share a common set of assumptions, which leads to a number of weaknesses and limitations. In these theories, development is seen as unilateral, that is, irreversible progression through the stages occurs in one direction, and each stage is necessarily separate from the previous stage. The theories differ somewhat as to the extent to which they recognize the young person as an active agent, though Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, and Gilligan all asserted that young people are not merely passive sponges, shaped through behavioral reinforcement and punishment. They are involved in using information from their world to organize and construct their understandings and interpretations. However, developmental stage theorists persist in viewing human development as a largely individualistic task, occurring within the person; their capacities and abilities naturally emerge over time, as they grow older. In focusing on the individual, developmental stage theories ignore, fail to acknowledge, or de-emphasize contextual and cultural factors. Kohlberg was particularly culpable as he made claims of the "universality" of morality, ignoring issues of gender, racial, and socio-economic variation, as well as the notion that people's moral judgements vary according to the factors associated with the context of the situation. Furthermore, developmental stage theories tend to overlook the fact that the stages, as normative expectations, are constructed, in part through social exchange. The process by which children grow into adults is not internal, natural, innate, without variation, hierarchical, or independent of context and culture, though developmental stage theories tend to present it this way.

**Critiques of the Constructivist approach**

According to Corsaro (2000, p.17), the focus of constructivist approaches tends to center on the effects of interpersonal experiences on individual development. There is insufficient consideration of how young people, through their participation in communication and social interaction, become part of interpersonal relations and cultural patterns, reproducing them collectively. Another weakness of constructivist approaches, such as developmental stage theories, is that they are primarily concerned with the endpoints and "outcomes" of development, as young people move from immaturity to competent adults. Finally, constructivists fail to ask questions about the realities experienced and constructed by the young people themselves. For example, there are few if any studies about the complex and interactive ways in which young people interact with their friends in various setting encountered in their worlds of school, activities, and families. The constructivist perspective has been the prevailing approach to youth studies for the past three decades (Corsaro 1997). Examples include Erikson (1965), Levitt & Rubenstein (1972), Austin & Willard (1998), and Lesko (2001).

**Contemporary research on youth**

At the beginning of the 21st century, the role and place of youth in our society is changing. There are more of them than ever before. In the U.S. there are currently more young people between the ages of 8 and 25 (puberty to adulthood) than there were at the peak of the baby boom. Although adolescents comprise a smaller proportion of the population than the elderly, their absolute numbers are growing and will continue to do so for the next few decades. By the year 2005 there will be over 40 million young people in their second decade of life, roughly half between the ages of 10 and14, and another half between the ages of 15 and 19. Moreover, the population of youth in the U.S. is

already more ethnically diverse than the adult population. As the young people age, the adult population will become increasingly diverse. By listening to this generation, we may all learn how to value differences, instead of allowing differences to contribute to conflict (Hamburg 1998).

It seems that in the U.S. we are not analyzing and approaching the experiences of youth with the degree of care they merit. Since the baby boom in the 1960s, researchers have concentrated on the ways in which adolescents differed from younger children or adults. These differences have been cast as problems that are unique to or characteristic of youth. Categorical approaches and programs devoted to each problem (e.g. adolescent suicide, unintended pregnancy, drug use) evolved, yet failed to listen to the authentic concerns of such youth. Emphasizing the problems related to youth brought attention to the age group, but results of this attention have been mixed. In some cases, increased awareness has led to a massing of resources to lessen problems facing youth. In other cases, the focus on youth has led to a sense that problems are inherent in their age group and therefore not amenable to intervention. The portrayal of young people in the mass media has tended to focused on the more spectacular events (such as the tragedy at Columbine High School) and has continued the practice of labeling entire groups of young people as problems because of these incidents. In some cases, reactions have led to the demonizing or blaming of young people for these problems (Epstein 1998).

The time of transition from childhood to adulthood has expanded. Youth are physically maturing earlier, thereby engaging in some adult behaviors at earlier ages, while at the same time, the age for assumption of meaningful adult responsibilities, such as economic independence, is being delayed (the aforementioned "long goodbye"

phenomenon). Thus, the experiences of youth today can arguably be said to be profoundly different from youth of other generations.

**Emerging adulthood.** A new body of literature has recently emerged in the field of interdisciplinary youth studies called "emerging adulthood." Arnett (2000) conceptualizes emerging adulthood as a period that begins in the late teens and lasts through the mid-twenties. He asserts that it is a transitional period, when youth move out of adolescence into adulthood, characterized by experimentation and exploration. Arnett (2000) draws on Erickson's developmental theory (1968) to propose that during this liminal period, young people often experiment with various possibilities in terms of their priorities, values, and beliefs. Thus, this theory provides some promise for orienting this dissertation project. However, upon closer examination, I discovered that even within the emerging adulthood perspective, there is little existing literature specifically about of teenagers' future goals and values. This is a new field that offers promise in the near future.

**Research on career development and occupation.** Within the vast body of literature on career issues, the aspirations and expectations of young adults have been studied extensively. Drawing from Piaget's developmental theories (1977), career theorists have studied the career choices of young adults. Ginzberg, Ginsberg, Axelrad, and Herma authored a foundational book entitled Occupational Career Choice: An Approach to a General Theory in 1951. They proposed that around the age of 15 or 16, young people begin to take their goals and values into consideration when thinking about their future careers. They weigh abstract questions about priorities, such as whether it is important to make money or to help others. (Ginzberg et. al 1951). Super (1990, 1997) a renowned career theorist, adapted the work of Ginzberg, et. al. in his

work on young people's attitudes and knowledge about their careers. However, Super does not address young people's values in his analysis. A survey of contemporary career development research offered nothing in terms of goals and values–instead the studies center on education attainment and career/occupational aspirations.

**Research on future goals.** Although numerous studies have been conducted on the data from the *Monitoring the Future* (MTF) survey series in its 23 years of existence, the overwhelming majority have focused on the core data or drug use and delinquency of American youth. Some studies have analyzed gender and/or race differences on various factors. The MTF researchers themselves have published a number of articles indicating the trends of their data over time. Only one study could be found that examined MTF data on high school seniors' plans for the future. These researchers, Easterlin and Crimmins (1988), looked at personal aspirations and life goals of students from 1987 MTF data and found that, in the preceding decade, materialism was on the rise. Making money had become much more important as a life goal, and this emphasis on finances had affected attitudes towards jobs, work, and leisure time. Coupled with two recent articles on teens' future goals (Mogelonsky 1998) and college education, and career aspirations of youth (Zill & Robinson 1995), an exploration of the expectations, aspirations, and future goals of American youth today is an important undertaking.

Today's youth, more than those of the past, place a strong emphasis on the importance of earning college degrees. A vast majority of students aspire to graduate from college, regardless of whether or not they expect to do so, taking practical factors into consideration (Austin & Martin 1992, Looker & Pineo 1988, McCartin & Meyer 1988, Plucker & Quaglia 1998, Smith, 1989, 1991). The students feel that these credentials

are the passport to higher earnings and are enrolling in college at record rates (Zill & Robinson 1995). Furthermore, they tend to place much more of an emphasis on making money as a life goal, over other goals such as "finding purpose and meaning in life," "giving my children better opportunities than I've had," or "having time for other things in life (besides a job)" (Easterlin & Crimmins 1988). In addition, today's youth tend to rate both "financial success" and "helping others who need help" as extremely high (Mogelonsky 1998).

**Research on moral development and values of youth.** Since Kohlberg's studies in the late 1960s, there has been quite a bit of work on moral development within the fields of developmental psychology, philosophy, and education. However, sociologists have largely been left out of the conversation. Surveys of the recent research in the field of moral development (Kerka 1992, Mulder 1997, Sunar 2002) indicate that the prevailing theories fail to challenge the assumptions of the developmental stage theorists and instead attempt to apply or test these classic theories in various settings, such as the cross-cultural comparisons by Bersoff and Miller (1993), Miller and Bersoff (1992) and Miller, et. al. (1990), or with diverse populations of young people, such as Wark and Krebs' (1996) assessment of Gilligan's critique of Kohlberg's theory. Within the field of education, there has been a proliferation of work on moral education since the 1970s. Nucci (1997) offers a synthesis of contemporary developments, which is almost entirely applied in orientation. Almost without exception, these works do not challenge the assumptions of universality and linearity of the developmental stage theorists, and are largely formulations of curricula built upon the earlier theories (see Berkowitz 1998, Kohn 1997, and Nucci, 1997). Though the terms "morals" and "values" are similar, I argue they are not synonyms and have distinct differences.

In this study, I define "values" as the ideas and ideals of what is important to a person. Though morals are also ideals, they seem to carry a connotation of judgement or obligation, sort of an imperative tone. Additionally, a person can have a value that is, quite possibly, considered "immoral." For example, a person can value financial success but in order to do so they might have to step on the backs of their families or betray their best friends. That is not "moral" behavior. This illustrates how values can actually be negatively regarded, and can lead to behavior that is not judged "moral." Morals are thought of as dichotomous, as actions that are "right" or "wrong" (Figurski 2000). Values are more accessible, they are simply "what is important" (Karp 2000). For this reason, this project focuses on young peoples' values, goals, and the experiences by which they are influenced.

**Interactionist Approaches**

Interactionism offers an advantage over constructivism in that it captures the innovative and creative aspects of young peoples' participation in society, actively contributing to cultural production and change (Corsaro 1997, p. 18). Youth are not merely socialized, like sponges, absorbing or internalizing normative expectations of society–instead they engage in what Corsaro calls "interpretive reproductions," that young people create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world in order to address their own concerns (2000, p. 298). Young people and their youth cultures are affected by the societies and cultures of which they are members and are in the process of co-constructing. Interactionist approaches are particularly interested in the importance of language and everyday interactions. This view is consistent with Holstein and Gubrium's perspective offered in *Inner Lives and Social Worlds* (2003), emphasizing that people's

interactions with one another assemble both their inner lives and social worlds. "As people interact, what they say and do creates a working sense of what is real for them. They establish, negotiate, and modify who and what they are in the course of the give-and-take of daily living, constructing and reconstructing their social worlds in the process" (2003, p. 5).

This study draws from both constructivist and interactionist perspectives. It is not entirely interactionist because the methodological approach I utilized focused on the patterns that emerged in the definitions of success the teenagers articulated more than how their definitions of success were constructed through the our interactions in the interview and/or during the activities and focus lessons of the program. By relying primarily on questions of "what," this project addresses the content of meaning as articulated through interaction and mediated by culture (Gubrium & Holstein 1997, p. 14). Studies about youth from an interactionist perspective are few as this is a newly emerging approach (see Epstein 1998, Farran 1990, and McDonald 1999). A more interactive approach would have focused on how the youths' definitions of success and articulation of their goals and values were produced in conversation and through the activities in which they were engaged. I would have employed a methodology different from that on which I relied, using more observational data and truly active interviews, more reflexive in nature. In the future, I hope to be able to conduct such interactive studies. In this study, however, I do draw from principles of interaction (à la Corsaro) as this work is based on the assumption that young people are active agents, engaged in co-creating the worlds in which they live. As a means of employing both constructivism and interactionism, I found the theoretical approach "small worlds" to be particularly useful in orienting to this project.

**Small worlds**

It seems that there are few works in sociology or the social sciences that explicitly utilize a "small worlds" approach, though this perspective is especially advantageous when exploring the experiences of youth[2]. "Small worlds" is a phrase coined by West and Petrik in their 1992 edited volume, *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850-1950*. The authors asserted that little had been written about young peoples' active roles and even less consideration of context and location that complicate and enrich such negotiations (1992). How children act depends partly on their surroundings and what the children bring to them (1992). The authors' premise is that the interactions of young people occur within a variety of seemingly separate but often overlapping and interconnecting "small worlds," including but not limited to their family, friends, school, and other groups and various other assemblies and settings.

Phelan, et. al. also employed the notion of "small worlds" in their 1999 study of students' multiple worlds, "Adolescent Worlds: Negotiating family, peers, and school." They used a qualitative and generative approach, relying on data gathered from interviews and observations to form a model that emerged inductively, placing the perspectives of the youths at the center of their analysis called the "Student Multiple Worlds Model" (1999, p. 18). Accordingly, the term "model" referred to cultural knowledge and behavior found within the boundaries of students' particular families,

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It is interesting to note that within the discipline of Information Sciences and Technology the term "small worlds" has also been utilized to refer to expectations of normative behavior that occur within specific settings. Burnett et. al. (2001) appropriate the works of sociologists and social psychologists and attribute the roots of a "small worlds" approach to Cooley (1956), Douglas (1970), Anderson (1978), Watts (1999), and others. They explain that people look at the world, with its everyday realities, as defined by the horizons of the "small worlds," the specific, localized contexts in which we live and work (2001, 536).

peer groups, and schools; presuming that each world contains values and beliefs, expectations, actions, and emotional responses familiar to insiders (1999, p. 7).

Holstein and Gubrium indirectly refer to this notion of "small worlds" in *The Self We Live By* (2000). They speak of "local culture" and "organizational embeddedness" both of which are components of "small worlds." According to Holstein and Gubrium, local culture is a constellation of ways of understanding and representing things and actions, and of assigning meaning to lives (2000, p. 161). Local cultures offer resources for self construction and hold people accountable thorough their situated discourses. Holstein and Gubrium also assert that self construction is "organizationally embedded" (2000, p. 165). They explain that localized meanings are mediated by organizational conditions.

Adler and Adler did not explicitly refer to "small worlds" in their study on preadolescent clique stratification and the hierarchy of identity, but they address the situationality of interaction by stating, "Identities symbolize meanings, and are acquired in particular situations based on people's comparison of their roles to others and others' counterroles" (Adler and Adler, in Holstein and Gubrium 2003, p. 431). Although Alder and Adler do not call these particular situations of identity production "small worlds," they are speaking to the same notion. That is, young people do not passively internalize their social world and define themselves in those terms; instead, they are engaged in constructing their selves through the ways they act and interact in particular peer groups and settings (Holstein & Gubrium 2003).

Thus, I borrowed from the above works to extend the notion of "small worlds" to explain the orientation of this dissertation research. It is my assertion that in the course of their everyday lives, teenagers today experience many "small worlds." Phelan, et. al. (1999) referred to family, school, and peers as three such locations; however, I argue

that there are many more and they vary greatly in size and character. For example, school can be called a "small world," but there are many smaller "small worlds" that constitute the "small world" of school. The ride to school on the school bus, morning assembly in the auditorium, Ms. Smith's first period English class, the hallway and lockers where students rush between classes, the picnic tables under the oak tree in the courtyard where the "popular" students eat lunch, the dean's office where students sit nervously awaiting punishment, the Key Club meeting in the computer lab of the library, the back corner of parking lot after school–these are all locations and contexts that operate as "small worlds" within the "small world" of school. In addition to the obvious three (family, school, and peers), young people in contemporary American society experience "small worlds" in each of the sports, activities, clubs, organizations, and programs in which they are involved. Sonlight operated as one such "small world" in which the youth I interviewed interacted.

**Conceptual Model**

In this project I combined both qualitative and quantitative modes of analysis, focusing on the results from semi-structured interviews rather than relying solely on highly structured surveys. These formats tended to allow the participants more flexibility and room to express themselves in a manner they deemed appropriate, instead of forcing them into my preconceived categorizations. Additionally, when engaging in participant observation I made an effort to "check-in" with the participants from time to time in order to assess my interpretations. The following conceptual model emerged inductively in the process of gathering and analyzing the data gathered through interviews and participant observation.

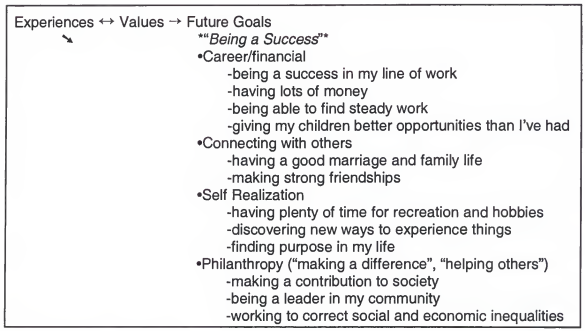


Figure 4–Conceptual Model

The model above shows that young peoples' future goals are influenced by their values, which are impacted by and affect their experiences. In this project, I used direct questions about future goals and definitions of success in order to understand their values. Goals are more concrete and easily definable than values. Asking a young person to explicitly state their ideals would likely elicit "canned," socially desirable responses. In order to avoid this as much as possible, I asked a series of questions, following the interview instrument, but unfolding in conversation. I began by asking about the importance of future goals, and then I asked the youth to define "being a success," to explain how they envisioned their own future success, and to describe a model of someone who was successful. Through analyzing this data, patterns in their responses emerged.

"Success" is commonly thought of as the epitome of future goals, it is the highest achievement. It became clear that their discrete definitions of success and the future goals by which they planned to realize this notion of success were informed by ideas

of what is important in life. In other words, their values influenced their experiences. Notice the arrow between values and experiences goes both directions, that is, their experiences both influenced and were influenced by their values. Additionally, their experiences could have a direct effect on their goals. In the sections that follow, I articulate the methods by which this research was conducted, the quantitative and qualitative results, and conclude with an exploration of how participating in Sonlight was a "small world" experience that affected the teenagers' values and future goals.

# CHAPTER 3
# METHODOLOGY

## Introduction

This dissertation concerns the lives and experiences of teenagers. Specifically, it focuses on how American youth make the transition to adulthood, looking at their future goals and values. This research is based on Monitoring the Future, a quantitative survey of over 60,000 high schoolers, as well as qualitative interviews of 70 local teenagers, all members of a community youth organization. In this chapter, I first describe the data from Monitoring the Future, then the methodology I used to conduct my qualitative interviews.

## Data Collection

### Quantitative Analysis of Monitoring the Future

The quantitative portion of this study consisted of a secondary data analysis of the 1999 Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey. An annual survey in its 23rd year, MTF is a probability sample of high school students in the U.S. MTF explores changes in important values, behaviors, and lifestyles of contemporary American youths, as well as tracking demographics and drug use trends. It is the most appropriate survey for the current study because it is a large probability sample of high school youth with the most current data available. It provides both an accurate and systematic description of the youth and quantifies both the direction and rate of change of trends over time. Large, distinct, and nationally representative samples of high school students are asked to respond to questions on demographics, drug use, and a variety of subjects including

attitudes towards social issues, changing gender roles, parental influences, educational and career expectations and aspirations, self esteem, exposure to sex and drug education, deviant behaviors, and crime victimization. Different versions of the questionnaire were administered to the *sub-samples* of the students. This file is available to download from www.icpsr.umich.edu.

**Sampling.** MTF is a probability sample design of a multi-state area. There are three selection stages involved: primary sampling units (PSUs, consisting of geographic areas), schools within PSUs, and students attending the sampled schools. Eight of the 80 PSUs were selected with certainty, while the other 72 were selected with a probability proportionate to the number of students. If the school had fewer than 400 students, all were asked to participate. Each school was asked to commit to two years of participation so that each year, one half of the sample could be replaced. Any school that refused to participate was replaced with a school of similar geographic location, size, and type (e.g. public or private). The total sample of students was divided into six *sub-samples* averaging 2,700 respondents each. The *sub-samples* were administered one of six different forms of the questionnaire containing the "core" drug and demographic questions, as well as various questions on the other topics. Since MTF began in 1975, the participation rate of the schools has ranged from 66-80%. In 1999, the overall response rate for students was 83%.

The sample data are weighted for the characteristics of the school which the students attend. The focus of this study is limited to an analysis of the data obtained from students who identified their race as white. The available data did not provide specific information about those students who reported being a race other than white or black. Responses were coded "white," "black," or "other," because I felt uncomfortable

analyzing and making generalizations about minorities without being able to speak to a specific group; I chose to exclude all students whose responses were in the "other" category, thus the 0. This is one major limitation of the data, and future studies should take this into consideration or even opt to place their focus on the experiences of students of color.

**Measurement.** The various content areas of MTF measure a wide range of topics. The current study will focus on the "future goals" subject area. Selected demographic variables were used to create cross-tabs to examine the relationship between the importance students place on certain future goals and some of their ascribed (age, gender, race, parents' education), achieved (high school program, GPA), and aspired (plans to obtain college and graduate/professional degrees) characteristics.

**Demographics.** MTF provides demographic information about the respondents. I selected eight of the demographic measures, for descriptive purposes, in order to create cross-tabs. All missing data or extraneously coded responses were deleted. The variables included: Age ("In what year were you born?" 1 = <1981, 2 = >1981), Gender ("What is your sex?" 1 = male, 2 = female), Race ("How do you describe yourself?" 1= white, 2 = black), Father's level of education ("What is the highest level of schooling your father completed?" 3 = high school graduate, 4 = some college, 5 = college graduate, 6 = graduate or professional school), Mother's level of education ("What is the highest level of schooling your mother completed?" 3 = high school graduate, 4 = some college, 5 = college graduate, 6 = graduate or professional school), High school program ("Which of the following best describes your present high school program?" 1 = college prep, 2 = general, 3 = vocation/technical, 4 = other), and Grade point average ("Which of the following best describes your average grade so far in high school?" 1 =

D, 1.5 = D+, 2 = C, 2.5 = C+, 3 = B, 3.5 = B+, 4 = A). Father's education and mother's education were used as both an indicator of highest level of parents' education obtained and as a measure of SES of the student, since no other SES variables were available in MTF (Bennett and Gist 1964, Popenoe 1998, Grusec, Goodnow, and Kuczynski 2000, Wilson et.al. 1992). Additionally, the education of the parents is likely to influence not only the resources to which the student has access, but also their own future plans (Jodl et.al. 2001, Marjoribanks 1994, 1998, Rojewski 1997). GPA is a quantitative measure of students' high school grades and is often used in studies as a "classic" indicator of motivation and achievement; GPA is often utilized for predicting graduation rates and job success levels (Bennet & Gist 1964, Nam & Terrie 1981, and Powers 1981).

**Future goals.** MTF included a section of variables measuring the importance of 14 life goals. The question about future goals was worded as follows: "How important is each of the following to you in your life? A. Being successful in my line of work. B. Having a good marriage and family life. C. Having lots of money. D. Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies. E. Having strong friendships. F. Being able to find steady work. G. Making a contribution to society. H. Being a leader in my community. I. Being able to give my children better opportunities than I've had. J. Living close to my parents and relatives. K. Getting away from this area of the country. L. Working to correct social and economic inequalities. M. Discovering new ways to experience things. N. Finding purpose and meaning in my life." Responses were given in the following categories: "Not important, Somewhat important, Quite important, and Extremely important."

Readers should note that the "future goals" section of MTF includes 14 items, yet for the purposes of this study, I omitted two: "J. living close to my parents and relatives"

and "K. getting away from this area of the country." In conversations with teenagers and undergraduate college students, students commented that the responses to these questions may be more a reflection of their "senioritis" (the "illness" that befalls many students as they approach high school graduation) than measuring a desire to live near or away from that which is familiar to them. As these two goals did not seem to fit into the themes addressed in this study, they are not included in this research. The remaining 12 goals can best be conceptualized in four themes: Career/Financial, Connecting with Others, Self Realization, and Philanthropy.

1. Career/financial
    - -being a success in my line of work
    - -having lots of money
    - -being able to find steady work
    - -giving my children better opportunities than I've had
2. Connecting with others
    - -having a good marriage and family life
    - -making strong friendships
3. Self Realization
    - -having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies
    - -discovering new ways to experience things
    - -finding purpose in my life
4. Philanthropy ("making a difference," "helping others")
    - -Making a contribution to society
    - -Being a leader in my community
    - -Working to correct social and economic inequalities

Figure 5–12 goals, listed by theme

I examined both the chi-squares of the cross tabs, noting the associations to see if the relationships between the demographic variables and each of the goals were significant. I then created a sub-group, limiting the sample to white students whose parents had attended college. This sub-group better compares to the 70 students that I interviewed, as they were all white high school students who, with the exception of one student, planned on graduating from college, and the majority of whom came from families where the parents had at least a college education. The number of cases of the

entire MTF sample included 2168 to 2186 participants. The number of cases in this sub-sample of MTF varied from 917 to 921.

**Qualitative Interviews of Sonlight Members**

A second data gathering technique for this study derives from interviews with and participant observation of 70 high school students who were all members of a youth organization called Sonlight. Sonlight Youth Ministries was a "youth choir" located at Trinity United Methodist Church in Gainesville, Florida. However, it was not a "typical" youth choir. In 1999 there were more than 150 youth involved, led by a team of 30 officers elected by the members, and guided by the selected president and vice-president, two high school seniors. (See Appendix B for the Organization and Leadership of Sonlight.) Each summer a group of 70 singers and 20 instrumentalists and sound technicians, along with staff and chaperones, traveled for ten days on a tour to major cities across the U.S. The participants were comprised entirely of youth from all of the local high schools, both public and private.

**History of Sonlight.** From 1984-2001 Sonlight Youth Choir was a dynamic youth organization at a large United Methodist Church in a mid-sized, southern college city. Under the direction of Rebecca Brown, this group grew from 15 to over 200 members, all students from the local high schools. Over the years it grew and changed from a "church choir" playing "rock n' roll" music into a multifaceted youth program with committees, projects, and activities. Although it was housed at and supported by the United Methodist Church, Sonlight's message was one of pluralism. The young people who participated were not required to take part in any service, nor were they even asked to become "Christians." Unlike popular stereotypes of youth choirs, there were no "altar calls," where students were expected or pressured to partake in religious activities. The

message was one of interfaith spirituality–that "god's stuff" is in everything, from the lyrics of the latest pop song to the books read in literature class.

**Philosophy of Sonlight.** Brown's philosophy led her to create a program that was seen by local teenagers as "cool." Many young people around the community knew of Sonlight, even if they were not a member. Each year brought a new flood of young people–the first few weeks they would number well over 200, sitting on each other's laps and on the floor, packing the room and pouring out the door. Rehearsals and meetings were often loud and rowdy. Brown ran a "loose" program because she was well aware that strict rules would not appeal to most young people. They already sat quietly in desks at school for hours each day; doing so on the evenings and weekends was not likely to keep their attention.

The reason the program was effective was because Brown did not talk "at" the teenagers or tell them how they "should" be acting or what they "should" be thinking or believing, nor did she pass judgement on them for experimenting with alcohol, sex, or drugs–she viewed this as a "normal" part of adolescence. She respected that they were in an intermediary period between childhood and adulthood, often experiencing a sense of angst and trying on different identities in an attempt to "find themselves." Instead of giving pat answers, Brown asked questions. Brown played the role of counselor and friend to many of the youth. She talked about values and priorities, something rarely overtly discussed in the lives of young people today. Over the years Sonlight has been the subject of a number of articles in the local media. A few of the recent stories give a glimpse of the enthusiasm that teenagers in the community have had for this unique program, and how Sonlight has affected their lives (see Appendix C for a list of the articles, and Appendix D for a discussion of the activities of Sonlight from 1984-2001).

**Focus Curriculum of Sonlight.** Within Sonlight, a Focus was a message time (about 15 minutes) that Brown conducted every week in rehearsal. Rather than a "boring lecture," Brown attempted to engage in discussion with 120+ teenagers gathered in the choir room. Focus was an integral part of Sonlight. When surveyed in 1996 and 2000, an overwhelming majority of the youth indicated that, for them, it was the most meaningful part of the program. In an effort to reach the youth through as many avenues as possible, Brown used a variety of techniques such as illustrations, surveys, props, diagrams, guest speakers, panels, debates, and videos. Most Focuses were accompanied by a handout, and many members would take extra copies to share with their friends. The reason that Focuses were so popular was because they dared to talk about the issues and ask the questions in which the youth were most interested. Through forms of popular media (music, movies, etc.) and by using their "language," Focuses reached the teenagers, challenging them to think about their beliefs, priorities, and assumptions about the world.

**Membership of Sonlight.** While there was no "typical member" of Sonlight, most of the students were from upper-middle class families. No data were gathered specifically about income, but almost all of the youth who were over 16 years old had their own car and affording the cost of travel for the summer tour to Colorado in the summer of 1999 was not a financial hardship for most, suggesting that the students came from a somewhat affluent background. Less than half grew up in, or had families that belonged to, the church. Each year a certain number (for 1999, this number was 70) of participants were selected to travel on a ten day tour. This selection was based on an evaluation process that weighed the students' level of participation in the program as well as their seniority (as opposed to a strictly "talent-based" criteria). Specifically, the

sample used in my study consists of all of the youth who went on tour to Colorado–70 high school students, aged 14 to 18 (median age equals 16). Sixty-eight percent (48/70) were females, and 32% (22/70) were males. The distribution across grades was roughly equal with 19% (13/70) ninth graders, 27% (19/70) sophomores, 24% (17/70) juniors, and 30% (21/70) seniors. The vast majority of the youth identified themselves as "white." Racial and ethnic minorities were considerably under-represented, with less than 5% of the youth identifying themselves as "African American," "Asian American," "Native American," "Latino" or "other." The mean grade point average (GPA) of the youth surveyed was 3.49 (with a standard deviation of .363). Therefore, in terms of their socioeconomic status, racial-ethnic identity, and education, these youth differ from the average American youth. Based on 1999 statistics from the U.S. Census, 63.8% of young people who lived in families with a median income of $38,885 identified themselves as "white." Eighty three percent graduated from high school, but only 24% graduated from college.

Demographically the students involved in Sonlight were quite homogeneous (mostly white, upper-middle class, and academically successful). It would be an overstatement to assert they were "diverse," as they were a select group of relatively affluent students who were privileged to be able to engage in self-actualization. Yet these youth tended to consider themselves very different from each other, taking for granted their demographic homogeneity, as they demonstrated a wide range of extracurricular interests, belonging to various "cliques" that reflected their identities, interests, and claims of individuality. The sample included a student body president, band "nerds," valedictorians, computer "geeks," members of the varsity football, baseball, tennis, soccer, and volleyball teams, "rave kids," cheerleaders, kids with body piercings and tattoos, members of the homecoming court, and students labeled "losers

and rejects" by other students. And each week these youth set aside what they often perceive to be vast differences to come together to participate in Sonlight's programs.

The youth were involved in ten "teams," or project groups, and six interest groups in addition to performing music. The core of the program was the weekly "Focus" time in rehearsals, from which the "theme" of the year developed. During the year in which this research was conducted (1999), the theme was "perspective." The songs and activities revolved around various aspects of "perspective": defining, explaining, applying, and expounding on the importance of recognizing that people's lives are contextualized. According to Brown (1999), to view a subject/idea/event in perspective one needs to place it in space and time. To give something its "relative importance," one measures personal value against universal spiritual value. An individual's birth date, birthplace, and upbringing create his/her space, time, and value index. Achieving perspective begins by realizing that one's point of view is just that...a view from one point in space and time. It involves seeing one's part as a mere piece of the whole. Thus, Brown and 70 members of Sonlight, along with chaperones, sound technicians, and staff traveled to Colorado in the summer of 1999 for a "perspective jolt"–to see "natural wonders" that spanned across time and space incomparable to those found in north central Florida, and to engage in activities and share experiences that emphasized a pluralistic point of view. Readers may recall that on April 20,1999, two Columbine High School students took the lives of 12 of their classmates, one teacher, and themselves as they held their high school captive in a terrorizing act, becoming a symbol of the proliferation of violence in schools. Sociologists have noted that this type of violence is often taken for granted in urban, lower socioeconomic schools, where the majority of students are persons of color, which explains why the violence at Columbine - a majority white, affluent school - garnered such media attention (Adler 1999, Dryfoos 1999,

Gegaz & Bai 1999, Janosky 2001, Males 1999). Although the Sonlight itinerary was set months before the murders at Columbine, coincidentally the first stop was to pay tribute to the high school in Littleton.

**Participant observation and interviews of Sonlight members.** Brown allowed me to accompany the youth on their trip to Colorado so that I could complete this research. (It might be important to note that the local newspaper, The Gainesville Sun, ran a series of stories about Sonlight's trip to Colorado and pleaded with Brown to allow one of their journalists to travel with the choir. She refused, emphasizing that she did not want to sensationalize the event, nor place too much focus on the shootings at Columbine.) Brown also worried that a having a stranger along on the trip might have a "chilling effect" for the youth involved.

My presence was not obtrusive since the members were familiar with me through my past involvement with the program. I was a member of the choir in middle school and high school (1988-1994) and returned after graduation to serve as an intern, working closely with the program from 1994-1999. From 2000-2001 I worked more behind the scenes on an archiving project, but was still involved and often present. During the 1998-1999 school year when I conducted the interviews, I was actively involved with the program. I was present at all of the weekly activities, interacted with the members at rehearsals and meetings, and facilitated the "women's group."

As an intern (a position that I shared with another college student) I was a liaison with the youth, helping the committees carry out the activities and programs that they designed and planned. Although I did not primarily assist with the musical end of things, the musicians all knew me, as I gave them reminder calls each week throughout the school year, recorded the weekly message on the phone line, set up the equipment for

their rehearsals, copied their music and maintained their music notebooks and files, as well as a multitude of other tasks. The majority of my responsibilities centered around assisting the leadership teams and working on the "Focus" themes. I worked approximately 10-30 hours a week as an intern for Sonlight. Most, if not all, of the members who went on summer tour in 1999 already knew who I was. Actually, due to the "script" I relied on to introduce and identify myself in frequent reminder calls and announcements, I was known as "Kristin from Sonlight" (said in a very high pitched voice, with inflection at the end of the phrase). The youth did not see me as an adult "authority figure," instead I was somewhere between "member" and "adult." I was in a liminal stage of "college-age graduate," just a few years older than the current members, but not far enough removed that I was treated as imposing or as other authority figures in their lives.

Two weeks before the choir departed on its summer tour, the informed consent of each youth's parent was obtained. This was an efficient process because the parents were required to sign a number of forms and make the final payments for the trip at an event called "Parents' Night." I approached each parent with the Instructional Research Board approved materials and explained that I was a graduate student at UF conducting research for my dissertation. All of the parents willingly signed the consents, and I reassured them that it would be up to their daughter or son whether or not they were to be interviewed, based on their response to the assent script. Each parent was given a copy of the consent document along with contact information in case of questions or concerns.

Before departure, and again on the first night of tour, it was announced to the youth that I would be approaching each of them to request an interview, and that I would be observing and taking notes along the way. The majority of the interviews were

conducted on bus rides. I was careful to select individuals who did not appear to be otherwise occupied, choosing those who were sitting quietly, listening to CDs on a walkman, looking out the window, or resting. I reassured them that the interview would not last long and that they could discontinue their participation at any point. None of the youth refused to do an interview. Most were more than willing, and a number of times enthusiastic (or bored) youth asked if I wanted to interview them or repeatedly reminded me that they were waiting to be interviewed. Some of the interviews took place during extended periods of free time, while "hanging out" in the afternoons, or in the evenings at hotels, or on the flight back to Florida.

Due to technical difficulties, six interviews were conducted by phone the week following the trip, with the help of the choir president. The quantitative data pertaining to the importance of various goals from 12 of the interviews are not reported, as they were lost due to equipment failure. However, their qualitative responses addressing the definition of "success" were intact and are included in the analysis. The interview instrument also included questions specific to the events at Columbine High School, which was the focus of my master's thesis.

In addition to the 70 interviews, observations attained during my extensive work with the youth and the program provided a plethora of information about the experiences of white, upper-middle class youth in America today and their future goals, expectations, and aspirations. The qualitative data analysis software package, QSR Nud*st was used to examine the data. Although the findings cannot be generalized to all high schoolers, this study provided rich and vivid qualitative accounts of the future goals of a select group of relatively privileged, motivated, and engaged young people.

## Instrumentation

See attached IRB approved interview Instrument.

## Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

### Limitations of Monitoring the Future Analysis

The sample data were weighted for characteristics of the school which the student attended. The majority of this study was limited to an analysis of the data obtained from students who indicated their race to be "white." Black students were also included in the overall MTF analysis, but because the available data did not provide specific information about those students who reported having a race other than white or black, I did not attempt to include the "other" category in my analyses. Since all of the youth I interviewed identified themselves as white, black students were excluded from the analysis of MTF that matched the demographic of the interview sample. This is one major limitation of the data, and future studies should certainly take issues of race and ethnicity into consideration, focusing on the future goals and values of students of color.

Another major limitation of the sampling procedure is that it does not include the youth who drop out of high school within the few months before graduation. It is estimated that this exclusion is just a small proportion of each cohort, around 15% (Johnston, Bachman, & O'Malley 1999). These youth are not unimportant; they exhibit certain behaviors, such as illicit drug use and delinquency, at levels that tend to be higher than the norm. However, the additional costs related to including the drop-outs would be immense because of the difficulty in locating these youth, and their general resistance to being interviewed. Furthermore, the current study is specifically interested in the attitudes of high school students, especially those that are engaged, and thus the small percentage who drop out are not included in this target group, although they may

be an important focus for other studies. Additionally, the conclusions drawn from the current study are not meant to be extrapolated to all youth of this age group; they remain valid for only high school students.

Although the samples for this study are meant to be representative of high school students throughout the U.S., there are four additional ways in which the survey data may not be fully representative of all high school students, according to the MTF codebook (Johnston, Bachman & O'Malley 1999). These considerations may limit the degree to which the collected data are valid.

First, some sampled schools refused to participate, and this could introduce some bias. In the 23 years of Monitoring the Future's annual surveys, participation of schools has ranged between 66% and 80%, and those who refused were replaced with similar schools in terms of size, geographic area, urban/city, and size of senior class.

Second, the failure to obtain questionnaire data from 100% of the students sampled in participating schools may also introduce bias. Completed questionnaires were obtained from three-quarters to four-fifths of all students sampled. The most common reason for having missed a student is their absence from school. However, the difficultly in rescheduling interviews is difficult. Students with high rates of absenteeism tend to report more drug use than the average, therefore, there is some degree of biased introduced by excluding the absent students, but estimates have determined the percentage to be quite small, so the use of weighting procedures is not necessary. Some students refused to complete or turn in a questionnaire, but this proportion is only about one percent.

Third, the validity of self report data may be questioned, especially in regards to drug use and delinquency issues. Still, the present study does not include direct, objective validation of the measures because existing inferential evidence suggests that

the self report questions produce largely valid data. Furthermore, the questions used in this survey have been developed specifically for this project through a process of question writing, pilot testing, pre-testing, and question revision or elimination. Fourth, sample size and/or design limitations could restrict the accuracy of estimates.

**Issues of selectivity of the Monitoring the Future samples**

It is important to mention issues of the selectivity of the samples, as they make it impossible to draw conclusions about *all* American teenagers. Each of the three samples involve different selectivity concerns. When looking at the data from the overall MTF, being limited to only students who were present in school when the research was conducted tends to exclude from the sample young people of the same age who have dropped out of school and students with poor attendance. For example, the importance ratings of some of the future goals may have been overestimated in favor of higher aspirations relating to career and philanthropic issues (as the data indicated that students with lower GPAs were more likely to value money and less likely to value helping others).

Additionally, the overall MTF includes only students who identify themselves as white or black (other persons of color were marked "other" and deleted from the analysis). This may potentially lead to an understatement of the goals of persons of color and persons from lower socioeconomic statuses. This may have the effect of skewing the goal ratings in favor of the values of representing a privileged white voice. For instance, one minority group that is completely excluded from all three samples are Asian-American students. These students are often more academically engaged than most, and are likely to place importance on goals related to being a success in their lines of work and having good marriage and family lives. In addition, African-Americans

have historically placed high value on the importance of community and collectivity, but by under-representing students who identify themselves as black in the overall MTF and excluding them entirely from the rest of the study, the importance ratings of goals related to connecting with others may be understated, when compared to the entire population of teenagers.

There are also issues of selectivity when comparing the data from MTF to the sample of youth who participated in Sonlight. As previously mentioned, just under half of the youth in Sonlight grew up in the church, and about half of the remaining youth were from a Protestant Christian background. Therefore, those who were conservative or fundamentalist Christians, Catholics, Jews, or affiliated with other religious traditions, as well as those who were not affiliated with any religion, were under-represented in this study. This may potentially affect the importance ratings of goals by placing greater emphasis on more liberal ideals, such as educational attainment or philanthrophic notions of equality and social justice. Additionally, only 32% of the sample of Sonlight members were guys, which is substantially lower than the proportion of all American teenage guys. This potentially has the effect of overemphasizing the importance of goals related to connecting with others and making a difference in the world, and under-representing goals related to careers and financial success. Research consistently indicates that high school girls place more value on social values, while guys tend to emphasize career and financial achievement.

It should also be noted that the members of Sonlight were all residents of a medium sized university town located in the South; therefore they were more affluent and their family lives were more stable than those of a random sampling of American teenagers. These youth may have been more likely to emphasize the importance of philanthrophy and self-realization than all young people, because of their privileged

status. Finally, the members of Sonlight who participated in this study were a select group of the larger organization. As previously mentioned, not all members of the program go on the summer tour. Those who have high attendance, are involved in the leadership teams and service groups, and are musically or artistically talented are more likely to go on tour. Recall that all of the youth who went on tour in 1999 participated in this study. These highly involved youth were potentially more likely to stress the importance of education and career goals, as many were high achieving students. Most importantly, they were also likely to make statements reflecting the values curriculum of the Sonlight program (emphasizing the importance of philanthrophy and self-realization over financial and material success). Although these statements addressing the possible selectivity of the samples should not be ignored, they do not discount the importance of the findings.

These limitations should not impede on the significance of the findings of this study. These data are the most appropriate survey for the current study because MTF is the most current large probability sample of high school youth data available. It succeeds in providing both an accurate and systematic description of the youth on important issues such as expectations, aspirations, and future goals in a manner that no other survey addresses. Furthermore, the 83% response rate of the students is impressive and allows the sample to be useful and nearly representative of high school students in America today.

**Limitations of the Data from Sonlight**

The students who participated in my interviews were all white, upper-middle class, academically successful, and engaged in extracurricular activities. Thus, this sample cannot not be generalized for all American teenagers. Additionally, these young

people were all members of a local youth organization and may offer similar accounts, given their shared experiences. However, it is an important beginning, and in the future I hope to expand the qualitative component of my research to other diverse groups such as racial and ethnic minorities and those of lower socioeconomic status.

**Data Analysis**

First I did a preliminary analysis of the 1999 MTF and noticed significant disparities between the importance ratings of various future goals. I decided to interview local teenagers in hopes of finding out how they defined "success," and what their future goals might be. After conducting the interviews I went back to the MTF data and constructed a sub-sample with demographic characteristics more similar to those of the youth I interviewed to enable a closer comparison between the national data and the accounts of the teenagers I interviewed. The sub-sample consisted only of students who identified themselves as "white" and whose fathers had attended college (and were thus likely to be of a higher than average socioeconomic status). I created and analyzed a series of cross-tabs looking at the associations between various demographic variables and how importantly young people rated these future goals. A number of tables were generated, listing the goals in descending order of importance (that is, the goals considered important by the most students are listed at the top, and those which the least students rated important are at the bottom).

I then began to analyze the qualitative interviews, utilizing Nud*ist. I created similar tables as to their importance rating of four goals, and then focused on the responses to the open-ended questions about defining "success." I selected quotes based on their frequency (those that appeared most often), salience (statements that offered rich detail, about which the respondent was remarkably passionate, or held deep

and profound meaning), as well as mentioning quotes which seemed atypical (the exceptions to the patterns, those that differed from the others). As patterns emerged, the data were coded and sorted into various groups and categories by theme. As a result, four clear themes of what "success" means to young people became clear. Implicit in these themes were notions of what the youth considered most important–that is, their values.

# CHAPTER 4
# IMPORTANCE OF "SUCCESS" AND OTHER FUTURE GOALS TO AMERICAN TEENAGERS

Popular images and stereotypes lead one to assume that young people today are focused on "making lots of money" and "being a success in their line of work," rather than helping others and valuing quality family life. While working on a paper for an introductory methods course my first semester of graduate school, I ran across statistics from a national representative study of American high school students supporting these assumptions: 89% of the students reported that it was quite or extremely important to "be a success in their line of work," 66% of the students reported that it was quite or extremely important to "have lots of money," while only 22% of the students reported that it was quite or extremely important to "make a contribution to society" (Johnston, Bachman, & O'Malley 1999). I found this interesting and speculated as to what was behind these numbers and what implications they inferred. At the time, I was working with a local youth organization and thought that these statistics were somewhat contradictory with the future goals and values of the 150+ teenagers that I observed.

The young people I worked with did care about the well-being of others. They often talked of not really knowing what they wanted to do after college, but they aspired to "make a difference in the world." Yes, many of the teenagers were also very focused on material possessions: wearing the newest fashions, and driving the "cool" cars with "phat" sound systems. At the same time, many of the youth were highly motivated, academically successful, involved in numerous activities and sports, and struggling with planning for their future. GPAs, SAT scores, and college applications were a burden and

the source of much stress. Competition to "succeed" and "be the best" academically, athletically, and even socially were constant pressures. Taking the scene at face value, one could have easily concluded that these were just a bunch of stereotypical teenagers and that most, if not all teenagers were the self-centered adolescents often portrayed in the media. But when speaking to the youth and listening to them struggle with questions about "who they are" and "what they want to do with their lives," superficial is an inappropriate label for the teenagers.

Not only did these youth talk about their philanthropic aspirations, their actions evidenced their convictions to "change the world." Each year groups of these teenagers put together teams and committees in an effort to "make a difference." They donated thousands of dollars of products for people living with AIDS, served meals at a local homeless shelter, built and renovated homes in the Appalachian mountains, developed an after school tutoring program, went on service projects to Mexico and the streets of Philadelphia, among other activities. During the interviews, as well as in my roll as a "college student intern" they spoke to me of their college plans, especially seniors, who were required to declare their major in college during the spring of their senior year. Applying to college and worries about admission were frequent topics of conversation. More often than not, they expressed a sense of confusion or conflict– wanting to pursue a career that was meaningful but clear as to how that translated into a college major. In general they lacked basic information about the possibilities from which to choose. It is important to mention that this was not a representative sample of all American teenagers. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the students were all white, college-bound, and from relatively privileged families (middle/upper-middle class).

I wondered what factors might have caused the vast differences between my own observation of teenagers and the statistical portrayal in MTF (showing that the vast

majority of high school students are focused on career and money goals, where very few consider it important to help others and work for societal change). Was it entirely due to the demographic differences between the privileged white youth with whom I work and the much more diverse sample of the probability survey (including students from all socioeconomic classes and various racial/ethnic backgrounds)? Has it always been this way or is this a 90s/Millennial trend? Maybe the difference stems not just from the demographic homogeneity of the youth with whom I worked, but is instead an outcome of their common experience in a program (a "small world") that encouraged them to think critically about their values, priorities, and goals.

In order to investigate these questions, I decided to begin by interviewing some of the youth in the program about their future goals–how important they considered "being a success" versus "making a contribution to society." The interviews were qualitative in nature–asking the teenagers to define "success," give examples of people they considered to be "successful," and to talk about their personal goals and aspirations. I also planned to concurrently analyze data from MTF to take a closer look at the results from the surveys and attempt to control for demographic characteristics. Due to a timely opportunity to accompany the youth on a trip for 10 days during the summer of 1999, I completed the interviews before analyzing the MTF data. However, this enabled me to utilize the 1999 MTF results which were not released until late in 2000 so that the youth I interviewed were of the same cohort as the high school students in the nationally representative survey.

Having described my research question, the existing literature, and the population of interest in the previous chapters, this chapter and the subsequent chapters of this dissertation are about the results of this study. Chapter 4 consists of the analysis of the future goals of American youth through a data analysis from the full 1999 MTF. In

Chapter 5, I present the results from a sub-sample of MTF which is controlled for race/ethnicity (only including students who identified themselves as white) and socioeconomic status (selecting only those students whose fathers had a college education or higher). Chapter 6 begins with trend data as a transition between the quantitative survey analysis and the qualitative interviews. It may or may not come as a surprise that this emphasis on "being a success" and "making lots of money" over "making a contribution to society" is a relatively recent phenomenon. In order to better understand how teenagers today define "success," given that aforementioned trends indicate its importance has increased remarkably, the focus of this chapter is the analysis of 70 interviews with local teenagers, all members of the same youth organization, detailing the patterns and themes that emerged in their accounts of "what it means to be a success." Finally, Chapter 7 concludes with a discussion of use of statistics and large scale probability surveys like those from MTF, discussing in particular how these types of "normative" studies can hide smaller patterns within distinct subgroups ("small worlds") of the population. I close with an exploration of the implications of the results.

**Results from Monitoring the Future: Overall Importance of Future Goals**

In order to examine the overall importance of 12 future goals to American teenagers, I began by looking at the frequency distribution of the responses of 2224 high school seniors. (Note: though MTF is administered to a probability sample of over 60,00 students each year, the section of questions about future goals is only given to high school seniors.) The students did not rank the 12 goals in order of importance; instead, they were asked to evaluate each goal individually, and rate it as "extremely," "quite," "somewhat," or "not" important. In order to evaluate and compare the goals, I

have listed them in "ranked" order. The goals which the highest portion of students ranked "extremely important" are first, and those ranked "extremely important" by the lowest percentage of students are last (see Table 1). It is also telling to look at the other extreme, that is, students who responded that the goal was "not important." One would think that these two lists would be mirror opposites, and for the most part, they are. However, it is significant to notice the vast difference in the percentage of students who rate some goals as "not" important versus those who consider other goals "extremely" important. (I also did similar rankings by adding the proportion of the students who reported "extremely" plus "quite," and usually the rank order came out almost identical. See Table 1.)

Looking at the table of results, one can see that certain goals were considered "quite or extremely important" by a vast majority of the students. Being able to find steady work, having strong friendships, being able to give children better opportunities," "having a good marriage and family life, and "being successful at work" were all rated as being "quite or extremely important" by more than 89% of American teenagers. Yet, less than 1/4 of the students ranked making a contribution to society, working to correct social and economic inequalities, or being a leader in their community as extremely important. Looking at the other end of the scale reiterates that same point. Over 20% of students said working to correct inequalities or being a leader in their community were "not important" to them, versus less than 2.1% of students who said that having strong friendships, finding steady work, having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies, being successful at work, and giving their children better opportunities were "not important" to them. It is clear that overall, American high school students rate certain goals, specifically those that relate to career/financial issues and connecting with others, as

"very important" in their lives, while they tend to consider philanthropic goals as "less important," or not important at all.

**Race and Students' Future Goals**

Race is controlled for in the sample as a means to determine whether differences between the responses of the MTF and sub-sample can be attributed to students' social locations. In MTF, 83.4% of the sample identified themselves as white and 16.6% of the sample identified themselves as black. Those who identified themselves as "other" were omitted, resulting in an N ranging from a low of 1780 to a high of 1796. There was a statistically significant difference between black and white students' rating of future goals in all but two goals (having a good marriage and family life and making a contribution to society). Black students were more concerned with financial security and connecting with friends and family than self-realization or philanthropy. For example, the top five goals rated as "quite or extremely important" by over 82% black students included finding steady work, giving children better opportunities, finding purpose in life, having a good marriage and family life, and having strong friendships. In comparison, the top five goals for over 89% of the white students were having strong friendships, finding steady work, having a good marriage and family life, giving children better opportunities, and being successful at work. A notable difference is that 77% of black students consider making lots of money "quite or extremely important" compared to only 58% of white students. Additionally, looking at the goals rated "not important" also provides interesting differences. The goal that both black (15%) and white (22%) students rate as "not important" is working to correct inequality. A summary of these data appears in Table 2.

**Father's Education and Students' Future Goals**

This study utilized father's education as an indicator of SES. In order to confirm that there are differences due to SES, father's education was controlled for in the sub-sample. The highest level of education for 27.8% of the students' fathers was high school graduation. A college degree is the highest level of father's education for 23.8% of the students. MTF included seven categories for this variable, however, I combined the categories and only those that were similar to the parents of the youth who participated in Sonlight were included in this analysis. There were no significant differences between students whose fathers had high school diplomas and those whose fathers had college degrees for five of the twelve goals: being a success at work, having a good marriage and family life, finding steady work, being a leader in the community, and finding purpose in life. The two notable differences between students whose fathers only graduated from high school versus those whose fathers earned college degrees was the percentage of students who rated having lots of money (68%, 61%) and making a contribution to society (59%, 67%) "quite or extremely important." Students whose fathers had higher levels of education were more likely to consider making a contribution to society important and less likely to say having lots of money is important. A comparison with existing literature indicates that students from high SES families tend to aspire to high SES careers, and students from low SES families tend to have occupational goals consistent with the SES of their families (Wilson, Peterson, and Wilson, 1993). Some theorists, like Biblarz, Bengston, and Bucur (1996) disagree, asserting that the influence of SES on young people's job choices is weaker now than it has been in the past. My results indicate that SES (as indicated by father's education) has a significant effect on the future goals of teenagers, at least for the majority of the 12 goals measured. A summary of these data appears in Table 3.

**Mother's Education and Students' Future Goals**

Mother's education was controlled for in the sample as a means to confirm that there were statistical differences due to mother's education but that it was not as sizable as father's education. Again, MTF included seven categories for this variable, but I combined the categories and only those that were similar to the parents of the youth who participated in Sonlight were included in this analysis. The highest level of education for 29.1% of the students' mothers was high school graduation. A college degree was the highest level of education attained by the mothers of 25.7% of the students. It is interesting to note that the percentage of students whose mothers had both high school and college diplomas was higher than the percentage of students whose fathers had the same. It is likely that more than one factor can account for these phenomena. Women now comprise 57% of all college graduates in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 1998). However, more men complete graduate or professional degrees. A summary of these data appears in Table 4.

There were no significant differences in the rankings between students whose mothers had high school diplomas and those whose mothers had college degrees on five of the twelve goals. For mothers as well as fathers, the two goals for which mother's education seems to make a difference were having lots of money (66%, 60%) and making a contribution to society (59%, 66%). That is, students whose mothers had higher levels of education were more likely to consider making a contribution to society important and less likely to say having lots of money was important.

**Gender and Students' Future Goals**

The number of participants for the entire MTF sample ranged from 2168 to 2186, depending on missing values. Fifty two percent were identified as girls, and 48% as

guys (see Table 5). Throughout this study, I refer to the high school students with the colloquial terms "guys" and "girls," as opposed to the academic tradition of "young men" and "young women." My rationale for using this terminology is to remain consistent with the language most often used by the students themselves.

Overall, there were statistically significant differences between the responses of the girls and the guys for all of the goals. Differences are especially notable when looking at the extreme levels: guys were much more concerned with monetary goals and having time for recreation than were girls, though they were similarly interested in career goals. There were a number of goals that girls rated as more important than did guys. Finding purpose in life was rated as "extremely important" by 63% of girls versus 55% of guys. Girls and guys had similar evaluations of the importance of making a contribution to society (both 22% of girls and guys considered it "extremely important") yet only 3% of girls compared with 8% of guys said it was "not important" to make a contribution to society. In general, girls indicated they were more concerned with socially oriented goals than were guys, though the differences were not vast. A summary of these data appears in Table 5.

**Summary**

Next I will be detailing the results from the matching MTF. The matching MTF is a sub-sample of the entire MTF, which controlled for race and socioeconomic status; it was restricted to just white students whose fathers graduated from college. Its design was intended to "match" or approximate the demographic characteristics of the 70 youth I interviewed, as they constitute a more privileged group. This analysis was conducted in an effort to investigate whether the differences between the youth I interviewed and the statistical "norm" of high school students on their importance ratings of future goals can

be attributed to demographic variables such as racial characteristics or relative access to resources due to SES. Also in Chapter 5, I present the importance ratings of quantitative results from the teenagers interviewed in comparison with both the matching MTF sample and the statistics from the entire MTF, hypothesizing that the responses from the interviews I conducted will be more similar to those of the matching MTF than the overall MTF. It is expected that their relative evaluations of goals related to "making a difference in the world" versus the importance of financial and material goals may show an even wider variation from the overall MTF than the do the matching MTF, due to their unique experiences as members of a local youth organization, which will be discussed in Chapter 7. At the end of Chapter 6, I conclude the quantitative portion of this dissertation by looking at trend data which examine how high school students' importance ratings of future goals has changed in the past 30 years, becoming more focused on career and financial goals while the importance of philanthropic goals has decreased. The importance ratings teenagers give to goals related to self-realization (achieving one's own goals) and connecting with friends and family members have not changed significantly over time.

Table 1- Importance Ratings of Future Goals from MTF

| Theme & Goal (q+e ranks, not ranks) | Rating q + e (%) | Rating not (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Career & financial<br>Being a success in my line of work (5, 9) | 89.3 | 2.0 |
| Having lots of money (8, 5) | 62.7 | 5.8 |
| Being able to find steady work (1, 11) | 94.1 | 1.5 |
| Giving my children better opportunities than I've had (3, 8) | 92.0 | 2.1 |
| Relationships<br>Having a good marriage and family life (4, 7) | 91.7 | 2.8 |
| Making strong friendships (2, 12) | 92.5 | 1.1 |
| Self realization<br>Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies (7, 10) | 75.9 | 1.8 |
| Discovering new ways to experience things (10, 3) | 60.8 | 6.5 |
| Finding purpose in my life (6, 6) | 86 | 3.6 |
| Philanthropy<br>Making a contribution to society (9, 4) | 62.5 | 5.9 |
| Being a leader in my community (11, 2) | 41.4 | 21.1 |
| Working to correct social and economic inequalities (12, 1) | 33.6 | 21.4 |
| N = 2337 | | |

Table 2- Race & Importance Ratings of Future Goals from MTF

| Theme & Goal (Ranks: white, black, entire) | n/p | Rating | White (83.4%) | Black (16.6%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Career & financial | n=1791 | q + e | 89.0 | 77.3 |
| Being a success in my line of work (5, 6, 5) | LR=.000[a] | not | 1.3 | 2.7 |
| Having lots of money (10, 7, 8) | n=1793 | q + e | 57.8 | 76.4 |
| | LR=.000 | not | 7.1 | 4.3 |
| Being able to find steady work (2, 1, 1) | n=1792 | q + e | 93.6 | 97.4 |
| | LR=.000[a] | not | 1.5 | 1.0 |
| Giving my children better opportunities than I've had (4, 2, 3) | n=1780 | q + e | 90.3 | 96.7 |
| | LR=.000 | not | 2.3 | 2.0 |
| Relationships | n=1970 | q + e | 93.0 | 91.0 |
| Having a good marriage and family life (3, 4, 4) | LR=.642 | not | 2.4 | 3.0 |
| Making strong friendships (1, 5, 2) | n=1796 | q + e | 96.3 | 82.0 |
| | LR=.000[a] | not | 0.5 | 4.7 |
| Self realization | n=1796 | q + e | 78.5 | 63.5 |
| Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies (7, 8, 7) | LR=.000[a] | not | 1.1 | 3.3 |
| Discovering new ways to experience things (9, 10, 10) | n=1796 | q + e | 60.0 | 61.0 |
| | LR=.025 | not | 7.5 | 7.7 |
| Finding purpose in my life (6, 3, 6) | n=1793 | q + e | 85.0 | 91.4 |
| | LR=.000 | not | 4.2 | 0.7 |
| Philanthropy | n=1786 | q + e | 63.6 | 62.5 |
| Making a contribution to society (8, 9, 9) | LR=.303 | not | 5.6 | 7.1 |
| Being a leader in my community (11, 11, 11) | n=1794 | q + e | 39.9 | 48.5 |
| | LR=.000 | not | 21.1 | 15.4 |
| Working to correct social and economic inequalities (12, 12, 12) | n=1793 | q + e | 30.3 | 43.5 |
| | LR=.000 | not | 22.8 | 15.7 |
| [a] = one cell with less than minimum expected value | | | | |

Table 3- Father's Education & Importance Ratings of Future Goals from MTF

| Theme & Goal (Ranks: college, high school, entire) | n/p | Rating | College (23.8%) | High School (27.8%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Career & financial | n=2034 | q + e | 91.0 | 90.8 |
| Being a success in my line of work (4, 5, 5) | LR=.235[a] | not | 1.7 | 1.8 |
| Having lots of money (10, 8, 8) | n=2036 | q + e | 60.8 | 67.6 |
| | LR=.009[a] | not | 7.0 | 5.7 |
| Being able to find steady work (1, 1, 1) | n=2035 | q + e | 94.9 | 95.6 |
| | LR=.433[a] | not | 1.2 | 0.5 |
| Giving my children better opportunities than I've had (5, 2, 3) | n=2024 | q + e | 90.8 | 93.8 |
| | LR=.000[a] | not | 2.5 | 0.7 |
| Relationships | n=2033 | q + e | 93.2 | 92.1 |
| Having a good marriage and family life (3, 4, 4) | LR=.846[a] | not | 1.9 | 2.1 |
| Making strong friendships (2, 3, 2) | n=2041 | q + e | 93.6 | 93.5 |
| | LR=.001[a] | not | 1.2 | 0.7 |
| Self realization | n=2039 | q + e | 77.9 | 75.5 |
| Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies (7, 7, 7) | LR=.000[a] | not | 1.0 | 1.1 |
| Discovering new ways to experience things (9, 9, 10) | n=2040 | q + e | 60.9 | 58.6 |
| | LR=.045[a] | not | 7.0 | 7.6 |
| Finding purpose in my life (6, 6, 6) | n=2037 | q + e | 86.2 | 86.7 |
| | LR=.603[a] | not | 4.3 | 3.4 |
| Philanthropy | n=2030 | q + e | 67.1 | 58.5 |
| Making a contribution to society (8, 10, 9) | LR=.000[a] | not | 5.8 | 5.5 |
| Being a leader in my community (11, 11, 11) | n=2036 | q + e | 43.4 | 37.3 |
| | LR=.428 | not | 19.0 | 23.5 |
| Working to correct social and economic inequalities (12, 12, 12) | n=2036 | q + e | 32.6 | 31.8 |
| | LR=.064 | not | 21.1 | 21.9 |
| [a] = some cells (5 or less) with less than minimum expected value | | | | |

Table 4- Mother's Education & Importance Ratings of Future Goals from MTF

| Theme & Goal (Ranks: college, high school, entire) | n/p | Rating | College (23.8%) | High School (27.8%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Career & financial | n=2107 | q + e | 91.3 | 90.7 |
| Being a success in my line of work (5, 5, 5) | LR=.458[a] | not | 1.5 | 1.6 |
| Having lots of money (10, 8, 8) | n=2109 | q + e | 59.3 | 65.7 |
| | LR=.098[a] | not | 7.9 | 5.4 |
| Being able to find steady work (3, 1, 1) | n=2107 | q + e | 93.8 | 95.0 |
| | LR=.901[a] | not | 1.5 | 1.1 |
| Giving my children better opportunities than I've had (1, 4, 3) | n=2097 | q + e | 95.6 | 92.6 |
| | LR=.000[a] | not | 2.6 | 1.8 |
| Relationships | n=2107 | q + e | 93.0 | 93.0 |
| Having a good marriage and family life (4, 3, 4) | LR=.371[a] | not | 2.0 | 3.1 |
| Making strong friendships (2, 2, 2) | n=2112 | q + e | 94.2 | 93.4 |
| | LR=.021[a] | not | 0.9 | 1.1 |
| Self realization | n=2112 | q + e | 77.9 | 74.3 |
| Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies (7, 7, 7) | LR=.014[a] | not | 1.1 | 1.3 |
| Discovering new ways to experience things (9, 10, 10) | n=2113 | q + e | 60.3 | 57.5 |
| | LR=.591[a] | not | 6.8 | 7.0 |
| Finding purpose in my life (6, 6, 6) | n=2110 | q + e | 84.4 | 84.8 |
| | LR=.053[a] | not | 3.1 | 4.4 |
| Philanthropy | n=2103 | q + e | 65.9 | 58.7 |
| Making a contribution to society (8, 9, 9) | LR=.020[a] | not | 5.0 | 6.8 |
| Being a leader in my community (11, 11, 11) | n=2109 | q + e | 42.6 | 38.0 |
| | LR=.148 | not | 18.6 | 23.3 |
| Working to correct social and economic inequalities (12, 12, 12) | n=2109 | q + e | 32.4 | 29.6 |
| | LR=.012 | not | 21.7 | 21.8 |
| [a] = some cells (4 or less) with less than minimum expected value | | | | |

Table 5- Gender & Importance Ratings of Future Goals from MTF

| Theme & Goal (Ranks: girls, guys, entire) | n/p | Rating | Girls (52%) | Guys (48%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Career & financial | n= 2181 | q + e | 91.5 | 88.9 |
| Being a success in my line of work (5, 5, 5) | LR= .003 | not | .06 | 2.5 |
| Having lots of money (10, 8, 8) | n = 2183 | q + e | 58.5 | 67.7 |
| | LR =.000 | not | 6.8 | 5.2 |
| Being able to find steady work (1, 1, 1) | n= 2181 | q + e | 95.7 | 92.7 |
| | LR= .021 | not | 1.2 | 2.7 |
| Giving my children better opportunities than I've had (4, 3, 3) | n= 2168 | q + e | 92.1 | 91.4 |
| | LR= .068 | not | 1.2 | 2.7 |
| Relationships | n= 2179 | q + e | 94.1 | 90.0 |
| Having a good marriage and family life (2, 4, 4) | LR= .000 | not | 2.3 | 2.7 |
| Making strong friendships (3, 2, 2) | n= 2186 | q + e | 92.9 | 92.5 |
| | LR=.021 | not | 1.1 | 1.5 |
| Self realization | n= 2185 | q + e | 69.8 | 83.0 |
| Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies (7, 7, 7) | LR= .000 | not | 2.0 | 1.4 |
| Discovering new ways to experience things (9, 9, 10) | n= 2185 | q + e | 58.7 | 63.1 |
| | LR =.054 | not | 7.3 | 6.9 |
| Finding purpose in my life (6, 6, 6) | n= 2182 | q + e | 84.3 | 88.3 |
| | LR=.000 | not | 5.2 | 2.1 |
| Philanthropy | n= 2176 | q + e | 65.4 | 62.0 |
| Making a contribution to society (8, 10, 9) | LR= .000 | not | 2.9 | 8.2 |
| Being a leader in my community (12, 11, 11) | n=2182 | q + e | 29.5 | 44.1 |
| | LR= .015 | not | 19.5 | 21.5 |
| Working to correct social and economic inequalities (11, 12, 12) | n= 2182 | q + e | 34.6 | 33.3 |
| | LR= .000 | not | 17.3 | 24.5 |

## CHAPTER 5
## FUTURE GOALS OF YOUTH: COMPARISON OF Sonlight MEMBERS WITH NATIONAL SAMPLE

In an attempt to more closely approximate the demographic characteristics of the teenagers I interviewed, the analyses in this chapter are restricted to students who identified themselves as "white" and whose fathers had a college education or higher. Each of the variables below–gender, GPA, high school program, and expectations to graduate from college– were selected because they are measures on which the youth from which the qualitative data were gathered differ from the statistical mean of the overall MTF.

### Comparison of Future Goals Ratings: Overall Monitoring the Future and Sub-sample

Looking at the summary table of the results from the matching MTF sample, the five goals that were most likely to be rated "quite or extremely important" are consistent with those included in the overall MTF, though they are in a somewhat different order (see Table 6). The top five goals according to the white, higher SES students include: having strong friendships, having a good marriage and family life, finding steady work, giving children better opportunities, and being successful at work; over 89% of white, privileged youth consider these goals "quite or extremely important." Yet, less than 1/4 of the students ranked working to correct inequalities, being a leader in the community, having lots of money, and making a contribution to society as "extremely important." This list is the same as the overall sample, representative of all American high school students, with the addition of the goal of having lots of money. This may be because the

higher SES students take for granted their positions of privilege. When looking at the other extreme, the five goals most frequently rated "not important" include working to correct inequality, being a leader in my community, having new experiences, having lots of money, and making a contribution to society. Again, these are the same five goals that the overall MTF sample rated "not important." Thus, it is clear that the matching subgroup of white, higher SES students does not differ notably from all American high school students in terms of how important they consider these future goals. They rate certain goals, specifically those that relate to career/financial issues and connecting with others as very important in their lives; while they tend to consider philanthropic goals as less important, or not important at all. A summary of these data appears in Table 6.

**Gender and Sub-sample Students' Future Goals**

When controlling for Race and SES, the gender differences within five of the twelve goals became insignificant (see Table 7). Those goals included: being a success in my line of work, being able to find steady work, giving my children better opportunities, discovering new ways to experience things, and being a leader in my community. Contrasting the entire MTF with the matching MTF, four notable differences became apparent. Overall, being a success was rated as less important by both the girls and the guys in the matching sub-sample MTF which is restricted to white, affluent, college-bound students. This pattern is reversed for one other goal; the privileged students were less likely to indicate that having lots of money was extremely important. Clearly these data show that gender matters in terms of young peoples' future goals. Furthermore, how gender matters varies by socioeconomic status, in that the differences between the girls and guys were more apparent among those youth who were less privileged.

Focusing on the responses of the matching MTF sub-samples, there are four goals in which a significant difference between the ratings of the girls and guys materialize. One quarter of the guys compared to 9.1% of the girls rated having lots of money as extremely important. Forty-two percent of the guys said having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies was extremely important, versus 28.6% of the girls. Almost three times as many guys than girls reported making a contribution to society was not important, though this is still a small portion of the overall sample (8.2%, 2.9%). A summary of these data appears in Table 7.

**Grades and Sub-sample Students' Future Goals**

Although MTF examines grade point average (GPA) along the complete 4.0 scale, I restrict my analyses to A, B+, and C, as conceptually this seems to be the most appropriate, as only 12.7% of the MTF sample reported having GPAs below C, thus they were excluded from this analysis. Although it may be more traditional to examine A, B, and C, I selected to use the B+ category in order to directly compare the MTF sample to the youth I interviewed (who reported their mean GPA to be a B+). When controlling for Race and SES, the GPA differences within three of the twelve goals lost its significance. Those goals included: being a success in my line of work, being able to find steady work, and discovering new ways to experience things. Contrasting the entire MTF with the matching MTF, all of the ranks were similar except for the goal of having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies; this goal was fourth of on the list of importance in the entire MTF and it went down in rank to seventh for the matching MTF. A summary of these data appears in Table 8.

Overall, students with higher grades were more concerned with philanthropic goals than were students with lower grades. Interestingly, the students with lower

grades gave more importance to having lots of money than did the students with higher grades. This finding is notable because doing well in school is positively associated with income, so it seems that the students who are earning the lower grades might have unrealistic expectations for their future earnings. Also, students with lower grades were less concerned with philanthropic goals than were students with higher grades. This might indicate that they were less motivated overall to engage in school, work, or helping others. Students with lower grades (16.7%) were four times more likely than those with higher grades (4.2%) to indicate that making a contribution to society was not important. Finally, students with an A grade point averages (10.9%) were more than five times as likely to say that working to correct social and economic inequalities was extremely important than those with C grade point averages (2.8%).

**High School Program and Sub-sample Students' Future Goals**

Students were also asked in the MTF study to indicate which high school program best describes their course of study: college prep, general, vocational/technical, or other. Consistent with GPA results above, the students in vo-tech programs were more concerned with financial success and less concerned with helping others than were students in college prep or general education tracks (see Table 9). Again, this finding is notable because college bound students are likely to earn thousands more each year than youth who do not attend college, thus the expectations of the vo-tech students seems somewhat unrealistic, as Adults age 18 and over with a bachelor's degree earned an average of $50,623 a year in 2001, while those with a high school diploma earned $26,795 and those without a high school diploma averaged $18,793 (U.S. Census Bureau 2002).

Focusing on the responses of the matching MTF group, there are five goals with a significant difference between students in different high school programs. Students

enrolled in vocational/technical programs (35.6%) were twice as likely to rate having lots of money as extremely important than those enrolled in college prep programs (15.0%). At the other end of the spectrum, those students enrolled in college prep programs (8.2%) were four times more likely to rate this goal as not important. The vast majority of college prep students (84.8%) said that having a good marriage and family life was extremely important compared to 68.9% of vocational/technical students. Students enrolled in college prep programs were more than twice as likely to emphasize the importance of philanthropic goals than were students in other educational tracks. A summary of these data appears in Table 9.

**Expectations to Graduate from College and Sub-sample Students' Future Goals**

The MTF study queried students about their intentions to graduate from college; responses were categorized as: "definitely will," "probably will," "probably won't," and "definitely won't." Fully 70.5% of students said they definitely intended to graduate from college (see Table 10). When controlling for Race and SES, three of the twelve goals became insignificant. These goals included: making strong friendships, having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies, and discovering new ways to experience things. Similar to the findings for GPA, when contrasting the entire MTF with the matching MTF, all of the ranks remained identical.

Again, consistent with the findings in the prior two sections, the students who intended to attain college degrees were less concerned with financial success and more concerned with self-realization and philanthropic goals. Focusing on the responses of the matching MTF group, there were significant differences between students who indicated they will definitely graduate from college with those who definitely will not on six goals: having lots of money, having a good marriage and family life, finding purpose

in life, making a contribution to society, being a leader in their community, and working to correct social and economic inequalities. For example, seven percent of students who definitely plan to graduate from college said having lots of money was not important, compared to just 1.8% of students who said they definitely will not graduate from college; more than twice as many students who definitely will graduate from college (29.5%) said making a contribution to society was extremely important, compared to students who definitely won't graduate from college (13.0%). A summary of these data appears in Table 10.

**Goal Ratings of Monitoring the Future Sub-sample Compared with Sonlight**

The teenagers who were interviewed for this study differ significantly from the representative sample attained by MTF. Specifically, the Sonlight sample consists of all of the youth who went on tour to Colorado–70 high school students, aged 14-18 (median age 16). The gender distribution was 68% girls and 32% guys. The distribution across grades was roughly equal with 19% ninth graders, 27% sophomores, 24% juniors, and 30% seniors. The vast majority of the youth identified themselves as "white"; racial and ethnic minorities are considerably under-represented with less than five percent of the youth identifying themselves as "African-American," "Asian-American," "Native-American," "Latino," or "other." The mean grade point average (GPA) of the youths surveyed was 3.49 (with a standard deviation of .363). Most of the students were from upper-middle class families. No data were gathered specifically about income, but almost all of the youth who are over 16 years old had their own car and their parents were professionals. All reported that they expected to graduate from college. Therefore, in terms of their socioeconomic status, racial-ethnic identity, and education, these youth differ from the average American youth, who, based on 1998

statistics from the U.S. Census, live in families with a median income of $38,885. Of these average American youth, 63.8% identify themselves as "white," 83% graduate from high school, and only 24% graduate from college. Due to technical difficulties (data lost in recording), these data are only available for 57 of the 70 youth interviewed. The adjusted number of girls is 42 (72%) and guys is 16 (28%). Again, it is important to keep in mind that this is not a probability sample and is in no way intended to be representative of the experiences of all American teenagers.

- Gender: 46 Girls & 22 Guys
- Grade in School: 13 Ninth graders, 19 Sophomores, 17 Juniors, and 21 Seniors
- Median Age: 16 (range = 14-18)
- Grade Point Average = 3.493 (s.d. = .363)
- Race: all identified as white
- SES: Majority from upper-middle class families

Figure 6–Demographics of the Sonlight Members

During the interviews I asked the 70 youths to rate the importance of four goals. Since the focus of the interviews was qualitative, I did not query the participants on all 12 of the future goals. Instead, I selected the three most relevant: being a success, having lots of money, and making a contribution to society. Being a success is commonly thought of as the epitome of future goals in our culture, it is the highest achievement. The Focuses in Sonlight often asked the youth to think critically about the material values that are often promoted and perpetuated in American society, and to consider the importance of more philanthropically oriented goals such as helping and connecting with others. Thus, for the purposes of the interviews, I asked the youth to rate the importance of only these three goals. (Another reason for doing so was that the focus of the interviews was to gain an understanding of how the youth constructed the notion of success. I feared that if I first asked them to rate the importance of a series of twelve goals before asking how they themselves defined the concept, they might be

likely to define the concept using the same goals that I had just mentioned. I did not want to restrict the possibilities of their responses by offering them a list prior).

They were asked to use a rating scale identical to the one from MTF, ranging between "extremely important," "quite important," "somewhat important," and "not important." Note that the first question is truncated from the version in MTF which says, "being a success in my line of work." The meanings of these two question differ somewhat, as does their interpretation. The question from MTF is more specifically career oriented than the open-ended version I asked. However, my purpose for doing so was to open up the topic of "being a success" and not limit or specifically associate "success" with work/career issues. Therefore, a direct comparison cannot be made when looking at interview participants' ratings of the goal "being a success," and those in MTF.

Eighty-three percent of the youth interviewed indicated that being a success was "quite or extremely important," loosely compared with 88% of the MTF sub-sample who responded that being a success in my line of work is "quite or extremely important" (see Table 11). These statistics seem to suggest that being successful is both very important to the youth I interviewed, and consistent with many white, upper-middle class American youth, demonstrated in the sub-sample of MTF. However, a stark difference is seen when looking at how important the interviewed students rated the other two goals: having lots of money and making a contribution to society. Only 5% of the youth I interviewed said having lots of money was "extremely important," compared with 18% of the sub-sample from MTF. When I added those who rated having lots of money as quite important, the percentage increased to just under one-quarter, compared with over half of the sub-sample of MTF. Fully 22% of the students I interviewed said that having lots of money was "not important," versus just 7.5% of the matching MTF sample. We can

see from these telling statistics that a substantial variation exists between the youth I interviewed and other teenagers with similar demographics–as the teenagers with whom I worked did not place the same value on having lots of money as do many young Americans. Additionally, the youth placed much more emphasis on the importance of helping others and making a difference in the world than do most high school students. Almost half (48%) of the youth I interviewed said making a contribution to society was "extremely important"--coupled with "quite important," the percentage rose to fully 86%. In comparison, just under one-quarter of the matching MTF sample rated making a contribution "extremely important" and when added to "quite important" the statistic rose to just over two-thirds. Moreover, not a single participant in the interviews I conducted reported that making a contribution to society was not an important future goal in their life. A summary of these data appears in Table 11.

Some of these differences may be attributed to gender, as there were substantially more girls interviewed than guys. There is a body of existing literature supporting the notion that girls and women tend to value social and caring roles more so than do boys and men (Gilligan 1992, Danzinger 1983, Marlino & Wilson 2002). To examine these issues a bit more closely, I separated out the responses of the youth I interviewed by gender. Contrary to findings in existing literature and popular notions, a larger percentage of girls (45%) than guys (31%) said that being a success is "extremely important." However, when combining this number with those who said that it was "quite important" the percentages are very similar: 81% of girls and 88% of guys. Only two girls and none of the guys said that it was not important that they be a success. When looking at the future goal of having lots of money, the responses of the youth interviewed was remarkably different from the matching MTF sub-sample. Yet, a comparison between girls and guys shows that there is not much difference. About half

of both girls and guys said that having lots of money was somewhat important, and almost exactly one quarter of girls and guys rated this goal to be "quite or extremely important."

The greatest difference between the girls and guys interviewed appears in their ratings of the importance of making a contribution to society. While none of the girls or guys rated making a contribution to society as "not important," a much larger percentage of girls consider it important than do guys, especially when looking at those who consider it "extremely important." Sixty percent of girls rated making a contribution to society "extremely important," while only 19% of guys did so. Almost all of the girls (93%) and only 69% of the guys rated this goal "quite or extremely important." Even though the girls seemed to value this goal more so than guys did, the emphasis here is that the vast majority of both the girls and guys I interviewed said that it was very important to them that they make a difference in the world, compared with two-thirds of the matching MTF sample, and even less than the sample representative of all American teenagers. Fewer of the young people I interviewed said that it was important to make lots of money or be a success than the national sample of high school students with "matching" demographics. A summary of these data appears in Tables 12-14.

**Summary of Goal Rating Comparisons Between MTF and Sonlight Members**

At the end of the 1990s, the high importance ratings for being a success and having lots of money seemed almost understandable, given the context of unprecedented economic prosperity, technological innovation, and political peace. Pursuing a career and having a steady job was important, if not an economic necessity for both girls and guys. Additionally, the late nineties brought about a time of increased academic pressure on young people to have higher GPAs and standardized test scores.

There has been a proliferation in the availability of and number of students taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses, increased competition for entrance into college, and dramatic increases in first year college students admitted with a full semester worth of credits. In the 1990s, attending college became a normative experience, with fully 70% of youth aged 18-22 enrolled as students.

Personally, I grew up during this era of a "faster" paced culture. It was almost as if it did not matter how much we accomplished or how quickly we did it–we were still "behind" or "late." By the time I was in college, the status quo of a steadily rising bar for measuring one's achievements seemed as if it had always been. I could not recall a time when American youth did not place such importance on achieving status and financial success. Attending college has become a more normative experience for young people today, unlike previous decades when attending college was an opportunity afforded by those who were privileged. I had learned that the 1960s and 70s were a time of social and political revolution–that young people in high schools and colleges across the U.S. joined together, committed to change and to working for civil rights, justice, and peace. Yet, as I was growing up, the 60s and 70s were a thing of the past, told only in stories or in history books, I had heard about student protests, sit-ins, and the like, but could not imagine that there was actually a time when a significant segment of college students were dedicated to working to change the world as they knew it.

**Trends: Change in the Importance of Future Goals Since the 1960s**

One of the benefits of using Monitoring the Future instead of other data sets is that it provides longitudinal data, appropriate for examining trends. Unfortunately, the few studies that do focus on trends analyze patterns regarding delinquent behaviors such as drug usage. The small body of literature on trends in the future goals and

aspirations of teenagers indicates that in the past three decades, there has been a sizable increase in the percentage of students who say that having lots of money and being a success in their work are very or extremely important, while the percentage of students indicating that making a contribution to society or finding purpose and meaning in their lives has dropped. An examination of the data (Crimmins, Easterlin, & Saito 1991, Easterlin & Crimmins 1988, 1991, Hoge, Luna, & Miller 1991) shows that these are not just smooth curves of increases and decreases. Annual plots of the results show that these trends have actually fluctuated dramatically. There has been a significant change in how important young people rate these goals since the mid-1960s. Easterlin and Crimmins (1991) looked at personal aspirations and life goals of students from three decades of MTF data and found that since 1966, materialism and career goals have been on the rise. Making money has become much more important as a life goal, and this emphasis on finances has affected attitudes towards jobs, work, and leisure time.

In the mid-1960s, students were more likely to consider making a contribution to society important rather than having lots of money. By the mid-1970s, the difference between their ratings of the two goals had lessened. In 1976, 46% of American high school students said it was quite or extremely important to have lots of money and over half said it was important to make a contribution to society. By 1986, almost two-thirds said it was important to have lots of money and the percentage of youth reporting that it was extremely important to make a contribution to society dropped to just over 20% where it currently remains. In the late 1970s, the numbers actually "flipped," meaning that more young people considered it important to pursue financial and career oriented goals and less indicated it was important to work to make a difference in the world. By the mid-1980s, the gap between the goals had increased, reversing the trend of the

1960s and 70s when philanthropic goals were rated to be of greater importance than economic and career aspirations. Throughout the three decades, having a good marriage and family life and finding purpose and meaning in life were continuously rated as more important than either financial or social welfare goals. However, by the late 1980s those ratings began to drop as the importance of financial goals continued to rise. Easterlin and Crimmins (1991) have hypothesized about possible explanations for this "flip." They offer reasons including major social and political events (Vietnam War, Watergate, OPEC oil crisis), adverse economic changes breeding financial insecurity (inflation in the 1970s and Reagan's trickle-down economic policies, a decrease in the relative value of wages so that two incomes produce the same standard of living as did one full-time worker in the 1950s and 60s), and changes in family structures (dramatic growth in women's labor force participation rates, increase in the number of single-parent households, decline in the number of children per family).

However, these justifications do not entirely explain the situation. Among the young people with whom I grew up and the teenagers in Sonlight with whom I worked, it seems that the national data do not reflect their priorities and values. While many of the youth in Sonlight do expect to have successful careers and relatively privileged lifestyles, they also tend to emphasize the importance of making a difference in society. MTF data indicate that as the importance rating of being well-off financially increases, the importance of helping others decreases. Yet my interviews indicate that there remains a vocal and committed group of teenagers who consider it important to have successful careers *while* contributing to the "greater good." Longitudinal trend data based on large scale probability surveys such as MTF mask differences found in smaller, select groups which may provide exceptions to the statistical norm.

At first I theorized that the differences between the MTF data and the accounts of the teenagers with whom I worked were solely due to demographic differences--the young people in Sonlight were all white, privileged, engaged students, and MTF reports the responses of black and white students, from all socioeconomic backgrounds, with varying future plans. Even when I created a sub-sample of the MTF data to match the traits of the teenagers who participated in my research, the participants were still much more likely than the "average" American high school student to underscore the importance of making a contribution to society. I theorized that perhaps it was their common experience in Sonlight, participating in the "values education curriculum" constructed in this "small world," that accounted for the differences.

Large scale surveys such as MTF do not allow for open-ended questions and responses. They provide interesting statistics about the proportion of students rating certain future goals as "important" in their lives, yet do not provide any information as to how they define terms such as "being a success," what these goals mean to teenagers, and how they personally envision themselves fulfilling their plans and aspirations. For example, two students might have very different understandings of what a given item on the standardized instrument is asking, and thus would respond according to their personal interpretation. Yet, large scale surveys typically do not give any information about how the respondents might have understood the question and thus conceptualized their response. Additionally, MTF, like other secondary data sets, provides no information about the context in which the surveys were given.

Contextualized and rich understandings can often be gleaned through qualitative research techniques such as participant observation and interviews, as a compliment to secondary data analyses of large scale surveys. My extensive involvement interacting with teenagers while working as an intern for a local youth organization (Sonlight)

provided me with the opportunity to conduct this research. As previously mentioned, I was a member of Sonlight during middle and high school (from 1988-1994) and was asked to continue working with the program upon my graduation from high school, during my undergraduate and master's studies at UF. Though I would have liked to include a more diverse group of participants in the study, this purposeful sample provided engaging and notable results about the future goals of teenagers in America today. The following chapter will detail my experiences interviewing and observing this local group of teenagers as they talked about their priorities and future goals.

Table 6- Importance Rating of Future Goals: Entire compared to sub-sample MTF

| Theme & Goal (Ranks: matching, entire) | Rating | Matching MTF (%) n = 2337 | Overall MTF (%) n = 918 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Career & financial | q + e | 88.8 | 89.3 |
| Being a success in my line of work (5, 5) | not | 1.2 | 2.0 |
| Having lots of money (10, 8) | q + e | 54.1 | 62.7 |
| | not | 7.5 | 5.8 |
| Being able to find steady work (3, 1) | q + e | 93.0 | 94.1 |
| | not | 1.7 | 1.5 |
| Giving my children better opportunities than I've had (4, 3) | q + e | 89.3 | 92.0 |
| | not | 3.0 | 2.1 |
| Relationships | q + e | 93.7 | 91.7 |
| Having a good marriage and family life (2, 4) | not | 2.3 | 2.8 |
| Making strong friendships (1, 2) | q + e | 96.9 | 92.5 |
| | not | 0.7 | 1.1 |
| Self realization | q + e | 79.9 | 75.9 |
| Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies (7, 7) | not | 1.2 | 1.8 |
| Discovering new ways to (9, 10) experience things | q + e | 60.4 | 60.8 |
| | not | 8.0 | 6.5 |
| Finding purpose in my life (6, 6) | q + e | 85.4 | 86.0 |
| | not | 4.4 | 3.6 |
| Philanthropy | q + e | 67.4 | 62.5 |
| Making a contribution to society (8, 9) | not | 5.8 | 5.9 |
| Being a leader in my community (11, 11) | q + e | 42.3 | 41.4 |
| | not | 19.0 | 21.1 |
| Working to correct social and economic inequalities (12, 12) | q + e | 30.2 | 33.6 |
| | not | 23.3 | 21.4 |

Table 7- Gender & Importance Ratings of Future Goals: Entire compared to sub-sample MTF

| | | Entire MTF | | | Matching MTF | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Theme & Goal | Rating | n/p | Girls (52%) | Guys (48%) | n/p | Girls (45%) | Guys (55%) |
| Career & financial | q + e | n= 2181 | 91.5 | 88.9 | n= 918 | 88.7 | 88.8 |
| Being a success in my line of work | not | LR= .003 | .06 | 2.5 | LR= .220[a] | 0.7 | 1.6 |
| Having lots of money | q + e | n = 2183 | 58.5 | 67.7 | n= 918 | 48.3 | 58.8 |
| | not | LR =.000 | 6.8 | 5.2 | LR= .000 | 7.7 | 7.4 |
| Being able to find steady work | q + e | n= 2181 | 95.7 | 92.7 | n= 918 | 93.5 | 92.7 |
| | not | LR= .021 | 1.2 | 2.7 | LR= .682 | 1.2 | 2.2 |
| Giving my children better opportunities than I've had | q + e | n= 2168 | 92.1 | 91.4 | n= 918 | 88.6 | 89.7 |
| | not | LR= .068 | 1.2 | 2.7 | LR= .313 | 2.4 | 3.4 |
| Relationships | q + e | n= 2179 | 94.1 | 90.0 | n= 917 | 94.1 | 90.0 |
| Having a good marriage and family life | not | LR= .000 | 2.3 | 2.7 | LR= .000 | 2.3 | 2.7 |
| Making strong friendships | q + e | n= 2186 | 92.9 | 92.5 | n= 921 | 97.6 | 96.2 |
| | not | LR=.021 | 1.1 | 1.5 | LR= .028 | 0.5 | 0.8 |
| Self realization | q + e | n= 2185 | 69.8 | 83.0 | n= 918 | 74.2 | 84.6 |
| Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies | not | LR= .000 | 2.0 | 1.4 | LR= .000 | 1.0 | 1.4 |
| Discovering new ways to experience things | q + e | n = 2185 | 58.7 | 63.1 | n = 921 | 60.6 | 60.1 |
| | not | LR =.054 | 7.3 | 6.9 | LR =.706 | 6.9 | 9.0 |
| Finding purpose in my life | q + e | n= 2182 | 84.3 | 88.3 | n= 919 | 86.9 | 84.2 |
| | not | LR=.000 | 5.2 | 2.1 | LR= .025 | 2.6 | 5.8 |
| Philanthropy | q + e | n= 2176 | 65.4 | 62.0 | n= 917 | 68.6 | 66.4 |
| Making a contribution to society | not | LR= .000 | 2.9 | 8.2 | LR= .005 | 2.9 | 8.2 |
| Being a leader in my community | q + e | n=2182 | 29.5 | 44.1 | n= 921 | 41.1 | 43.4 |
| | not | LR= .015 | 19.5 | 21.5 | LR= .152 | 16.7 | 20.9 |
| Working to correct social and economic inequalities | q + e | n= 2182 | 34.6 | 33.3 | n= 918 | 32.0 | 28.7 |
| | not | LR= .000 | 17.3 | 24.5 | LR= .001 | 17.2 | 28.5 |

[a] = 2 cells with less than minimum expected value

Table 8–GPA & Importance Ratings of Future Goals: Entire compared to sub-sample MTF

| Theme & Goal (Ranks: B+,(Matching) | n/p | Rating | A= 20.9% | B+= 20.6% | C= 3.9%, (GPA≤C: 12.7%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Career & financial | n=917 | q + e | 92.2 | 88.4 | 86.1 |
| Being a success in my line of work (5, 5) | LR=.888[a] | not | 0.5 | 1.1 | 0 |
| Having lots of money (10, 10) | n=917 | q + e | 50.7 | 51.9 | 58.4 |
| | LR=.023[a] | not | 11.0 | 5.3 | 8.3 |
| Being able to find steady work (3, 3) | n=917 | q + e | 72.3 | 91.1 | 91.7 |
| | LR=.487[a] | not | 2.1 | 1.6 | 0 |
| Giving my children better opportunities than I've had (4, 5) | n=912 | q + e | 88.5 | 88.4 | 82.8 |
| | LR=.045[a] | not | 3.2 | 3.2 | 11.4 |
| Relationships | n=916 | q + e | 95.8 | 92.6 | 88.9 |
| Having a good marriage and family life (2, 2) | LR=.000[a] | not | 1.0 | 5.3 | 5.6 |
| Making strong friendships (1, 1) | n=920 | q + e | 98.5 | 98.4 | 91.6 |
| | LR=.063[a] | not | 0 | 1.6 | 2.8 |
| Self realization | n=920 | q + e | 75.2 | 85.1 | 75.0 |
| Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies (4, 7) | LR=.042[a] | not | 1.0 | 1.1 | 0 |
| Discovering new ways to experience things (9, 9) | n=920 | q + e | 57.6 | 60.3 | 69.4 |
| | LR=.509[a] | not | 6.2 | 10.1 | 8.3 |
| Finding purpose in my life (7, 6) | n=918 | q + e | 88.1 | 81.9 | 86.1 |
| | LR=.065[a] | not | 3.1 | 7.4 | 8.3 |
| Philanthropy | n=916 | q + e | 78.7 | 65.4 | 44.4 |
| Making a contribution to society (8, 8) | LR=.000[a] | not | 4.2 | 3.7 | 16.7 |
| Being a leader in my community (11, 11) | n=920 | q + e | 53.4 | 45.5 | 16.7 |
| | LR=.000[a] | not | 36.8 | 17.5 | 41.7 |
| Working to correct social and economic inequalities (12, 12) | n=920 | q + e | 33.7 | 29.6 | 22.2 |
| | LR=.012[a] | not | 15.5 | 24.9 | 36.1 |
| [a] = some cells with less than minimum expected value | | | | | |

Table 9--High School Program & Importance Ratings of Future Goals: Entire compared to sub-sample MTF

| Theme & Goal (Ranks: college, prep, matching) | n/p | Rating | College Prep (68%) | General (23%) | Votech (5%) | Other (4%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Career & financial | n=927 | q + e | 89.1 | 89.4 | 84.4 | 90.9 |
| Being a success in my line of work (5, 5) | LR=.223[a] | not | 0.8 | 1.8 | 2.2 | 3.0 |
| Having lots of money (10, 10) | n=927 LR=.021[a] | q + e | 52.8 | 55.5 | 55.6 | 58.1 |
| | | not | 8.2 | 7.3 | 2.2 | 6.5 |
| Being able to find steady work (3, 3) | n=927 LR=.232[a] | q + e | 92.6 | 94.4 | 95.6 | 97.0 |
| | | not | 1.7 | 0.9 | 4.4 | 0 |
| Giving my children better opportunities than I've had (4, 4) | n=921 LR=.569[a] | q + e | 89.5 | 90.8 | 91.1 | 81.8 |
| | | not | 2.7 | 3.2 | 4.4 | 3.0 |
| Relationships | n=926 | q + e | 95.3 | 91.3 | 86.7 | 90.9 |
| Having a good marriage and family life (2, 2) | LR=.010[a] | not | 1.6 | 3.2 | 4.4 | 6.1 |
| Making strong friendships (1, 1) | n=930 LR=.246[a] | q + e | 97.4 | 96.8 | 93.3 | 90.6 |
| | | not | 6.3 | 0.1 | 4.4 | 3.0 |
| Self realization | n=930 | q + e | 80.5 | 79.9 | 77.8 | 72.7 |
| Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies (7, 7) | LR=.480[a] | not | 1.3 | 0.5 | 4.4 | 0 |
| Discovering new ways to experience things (9, 9) | n=930 LR=.033[a] | q + e | 58.7 | 67.2 | 51.2 | 57.6 |
| | | not | 7.7 | 6.8 | 6.7 | 24.2 |
| Finding purpose in my life (6, 6) | n=928 LR=.669[a] | q + e | 85.3 | 87.9 | 81.4 | 87.9 |
| | | not | 3.8 | 5.0 | 11.6 | 3.0 |
| Philanthropy | n=926 | q + e | 69.9 | 64.3 | 57.8 | 54.5 |
| Making a contribution to society (8, 8) | LR=.002[a] | not | 3.6 | 9.3 | 11.1 | 12.1 |
| Being a leader in my community (11, 11) | n=930 LR=.002[a] | q + e | 46.0 | 35.2 | 33.4 | 36.4 |
| | | not | 15.3 | 26.9 | 33.3 | 18.2 |
| Working to correct social and economic inequalities (12, 12) | n=930 LR=.001[a] | q + e | 27.7 | 34.2 | 26.7 | 27.3 |
| | | not | 20.4 | 26.9 | 42.2 | 27.3 |
| [a] = some cells (6 or less) with less than minimum expected value | | | | | | |

Table 10- Expectations to Graduate from College & Importance Ratings of Future Goals: Entire compared to sub-sample MTF

| Theme & Goal (Ranks: def will, matching) | n/p | Rating | Def. Will (70.5%) | Prob. Will (18%) | Prob. Won't (5.5%) | Def. Won't (6%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Career & financial | n=905 | q + e | 91.5 | 81.5 | 90.0 | 81.1 |
| Being a success in my line of work (5, 5) | LR=.002[a] | not | 0.6 | 3.1 | 2.0 | 1.8 |
| Having lots of money | n=905 | q + e | 56.6 | 43.5 | 44.9 | 60.0 |
| (10, 10) | LR=.008[a] | not | 7.1 | 9.2 | 14.3 | 1.8 |
| Being able to find steady | n=905 | q + e | 94.5 | 88.9 | 95.9 | 89.1 |
| work (3, 3) | LR=.009[a] | not | 1.6 | 1.2 | 2.0 | 3.6 |
| Giving my children better | n=900 | q + e | 91.7 | 83.3 | 87.8 | 85.5 |
| opportunities than I've had (4, 4) | LR.086[a] | not | 2.4 | 4.9 | 0 | 3.6 |
| Relationships | n=904 | q + e | 95.7 | 88.3 | 88.0 | 96.2 |
| Having a good marriage and family life (2, 2) | LR=.000 | not | 1.4 | 4.3 | 0 | 5.6 |
| Making strong | n=908 | q + e | 97.7 | 95.7 | 98.0 | 90.9 |
| friendships (1, 1) | LR=.110 | not | 0.2 | 1.2 | 0 | 3.6 |
| Self realization | n=908 | q + e | 82.5 | 74.2 | 74.0 | 78.2 |
| Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies (7, 7) | LR=.312[a] | not | 1.1 | 1.2 | 2.0 | 1.8 |
| Discovering new ways to | n=908 | q + e | 60.3 | 58.2 | 68.0 | 67.3 |
| experience things (9, 9) | LR=.111[a] | not | 7.7 | 12.9 | 4 | 1.8 |
| Finding purpose in my | n=907 | q + e | 85.8 | 86.4 | 90.0 | 72.8 |
| life (6, 6) | LR=.003[a] | not | 3.8 | 5.6 | 0 | 14.5 |
| Philanthropy | n=904 | q + e | 71.7 | 57.1 | 56.0 | 59.3 |
| Making a contribution to society (8, 8) | LR.000[a] | not | 5.6 | 3.3 | 10.0 | 14.8 |
| Being a leader in my | n=908 | q + e | 48.3 | 33.1 | 22.0 | 25.4 |
| community (11, 11) | LR=.000 | not | 14.1 | 27.6 | 32.0 | 32.7 |
| Working to correct social | n=908 | q + e | 32.3 | 29.5 | 18.0 | 29.1 |
| and economic inequalities (12, 12) | LR=.011[a] | not | 22.8 | 26.4 | 30.0 | 41.8 |
| [a] = some cells (5 or less) with less than minimum expected value | | | | | | |

Table 11- Sonlight Members' Importance Rating of Future Goals

| Goals/Ranks (%/n) | extremely | quite | q + e | somewhat | not |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Graduate from college | 74.1 (43) | 20.7 (12) | 94.8 (55) | 5.2 (3) | 0 |
| Being a success in my line of work | 41.4 (24) | 41.4 (24) | 82.8 (48) | 13.8 (8) | 3.4 (2) |
| Making a contribution to society | 48.3 (28) | 37.9 (22) | 86.2 (50) | 13.8 (8) | 0 |
| Having lots of money | 5.2 (3) | 19.0 (11) | 24.2 (14) | 53.4 (31) | 22.4 (13) |

Table 12- Sonlight Members' Importance Rating of Future Goals by Gender

| | Girls n = 42 (72.4%) | | | | | Guys n = 16 (27.6%) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Goals/Ranks | extremely | quite | q + e | somewhat | not | extremely | quite | q + e | somewhat | not |
| Graduate from college | 76.2 (32) | 16.7 (7) | 92.9 (39) | 7.1 (3) | 0 | 68.8 (11) | 31.3 (5) | 38.1 (16) | 0 | 0 |
| Being a success in my line of work | 45.2 (19) | 35.7 (15) | 80.9 (34) | 14.3 (6) | 9.5 (2) | 31.3 (5) | 56.3 (9) | 87.6 (14) | 12.5 (2) | 0 |
| Making a contribution to society | 59.5 (25) | 33.3 (14) | 92.8 (39) | 7.1 (3) | 0 | 18.8 (3) | 50 (8) | 68.8 (11) | 31.3 (5) | 0 |
| Having lots of money | 7.1 (3) | 16.7 (7) | 23.8 (10) | 52.4 (22) | 23.8 (10) | 0 | 25 (4) | 25 (4) | 56.3 (9) | 18.8 (3) |

Table 13- Importance Ratings of Future Goals by Gender: Comparisons of Overall and Sub-sample MTF with Sonlight Members

| Goals | Rating | Sonlight | | Sub-sample MTF | | Overall MTF | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Girls (n = 42) | Guys (n = 16) | Girls (n ≈ 418) | Guys (n ≈ 500) | Girls (n ≈ 1130) | Guys (n ≈ 1051) |
| Being a success (in my line of work) | q + e | 80.9 | 87.6 | 88.7 | 88.8 | 91.5 | 88.9 |
| | e | 45.2 | 31.3 | 54.3 | 60.2 | 64.7 | 62.5 |
| | not | 9.5 | 0 | 7.0 | 1.6 | 6.0 | 2.5 |
| Making a contribution to society | q + e | 92.8 | 68.8 | 68.6 | 66.4 | 65.4 | 62.0 |
| | e | 59.5 | 18.8 | 24.7 | 23.4 | 22.3 | 22.3 |
| | not | 0 | 0 | 2.9 | 8.2 | 2.9 | 8.2 |
| Having lots of money | q + e | 23.8 | 25.0 | 48.3 | 58.8 | 58.5 | 67.7 |
| | e | 7.1 | 0 | 9.1 | 25.4 | 18.4 | 33.3 |
| | not | 23.8 | 18.8 | 7.7 | 7.4 | 6.8 | 5.2 |

Table 14– Importance Ratings of Future Goals: Comparisons of Overall and Sub-sample MTF with Sonlight Members

| | | Sonlight Members (n = 58) | Sub-sample MTF (n ≈ 925) | Overall MTF (n ≈ 2180) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Being a success (in my line of work) | rank | 2 | 5 | 5 |
| | q + e | 82.8 | 88.8 | 89.3 |
| | e | 41.4 | 57.5 | 62.8 |
| | not | 3.4 | 1.2 | 2.0 |
| Making a contribution to society | rank | 1 | 8 | 9 |
| | q + e | 86.2 | 67.4 | 62.5 |
| | e | 48.3 | 24.0 | 21.7 |
| | not | 0 | 5.8 | 5.9 |
| Having lots of money | rank | 3 | 10 | 8 |
| | q + e | 24.2 | 54.1 | 62.7 |
| | e | 5.2 | 18.0 | 26.5 |
| | not | 22.4 | 7.5 | 5.8 |
| Missing data on 12 of the 70 Sonlight Members for these goal ratings. | | | | |

## CHAPTER 6
## HOW DO TEENAGERS DEFINE "SUCCESS"?

Given the backdrop of the current trends in future goals, the results from my work with over 120 teenagers, including 70 interviews I conducted, are even more telling. Examining the quantitative evaluation of various goals alone indicates that the students I interviewed differ greatly from the majority of American teenagers, even those who are also white and relatively privileged. This raises a question as to why the 70 teenagers interviewed were less concerned with material and financial wealth and more concerned with making a difference in the world than the average teenager. Could it possibly be that survey data, such as MTF, hides nuanced meanings and rich detail of how these youth define various future goals that would be better ascertained through qualitative interviews? Perhaps the Sonlight members' definitions of success and future goals differed from a representative sample of American teenagers due to their experiences in the small world of the youth program.

In this chapter I begin by outlining the major themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews, specifically focusing on what the teenagers talk about regarding their future goals and what "being a success" means to them. Next I mention some of the responses that were less commonly offered, including a discussion of unexpected findings in relation to gender. These provide interesting insights into teenagers' definitions of success and their goals for the future.

In an effort to gain a better understanding of what the youth meant by achieving their future goals, and what they meant by "being a success," I conducted qualitative

interviews with those who were active participants in the "small world" of Sonlight. As previously mentioned, the number of high school students involved in Sonlight fluctuated. At the beginning of the school year the afternoon rehearsals and meetings would be literally overflowing with teenagers–filling up the rows of chairs, sitting on the floor, packed in the corners, on each others' laps, standing room only. By early spring the numbers usually dropped to around 140. As spring progressed and tour approached, attendance tapered off to around 125 where it remained. Only 70-90 members were permitted to tour each summer, and decisions were based on evaluations of participation. Musical talent was a consideration, but it weighed less than seniority, leadership, and involvement. Thus, the teenagers who would go on tour tended to be more involved than other program participants. The interview sample consisted of the entire population (n = 70) of program members who went on tour in June 1999. Qualitative results from these interviews as well as my observations from working with the teenagers involved in the program will be detailed below.

It is important to keep in mind, as previously mentioned, that the youth I interviewed do not fit the statistical "norm" and their responses are not representative of the entire population of American high school students. They differ from "average" teenagers in that they are all white, come from higher SES families (indicated by their father's educational level), and all live in the university town of Gainesville. Their grades in school are higher than average (mean GPA = 3.5) and everyone I interviewed reported that they both aspire and expect to earn a college degree. This compares with about 70% of college-aged Americans who are enrolled in colleges and universities (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2001), and just over a quarter of the total population who receive their diplomas (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). Furthermore, I estimated that about 17 (25%) had divorced parents and only about 15% lived in single-parent

households (two due to the death of their fathers). At least 26 (37%) of the youth had parents who were professors or administrators at the University, including a number of department chairs, vice presidents, and chiefs of medicine. The vast majority of their parents held professional careers, with only a few working blue-collar or lower SES jobs. A small minority of the mothers did not work for pay (less than five total); most of the teenagers' mothers had careers of their own, ranging from physicians to accountants to teachers. These demographic data are provided to underscore the fact that though they are more privileged in terms of their socioeconomic status and educational expectations than "average" teenagers, the youth I interviewed tended to be similar to the 90% of American youth who make it through adolescence without being labeled as "juvenile delinquents" or "deviants," and are relatively well-adjusted. Furthermore, this study responds to Furstenberg's call for research on the lives of privileged, college-bound teenagers (2000).

After completing the informed consent process with each interview participant, I briefly asked them to rate the importance of four future goals using the same wording and scale as MTF. These four goals included: graduating from college, being a success, making a contribution to society, and having lots of money. It is important to note that I left out the phrase "in my line of work" from the second goal ("being a success"). I did so in hopes of not restricting the notion of "success" to work and career. The focus of the interview process was to glean an understanding of how they defined success, what concepts and words they used to explain and describe what "being a success" means, and how they personally aspired to achieve their own future goals. Instead of querying about how important they rated fourteen separate goals on a numeric scale of measurement, I phrased my questions in a manner that attempted to elicit responses that illustrated their aspirations and how they envisioned their own futures. Thus, the

term "success," as used in the interview instrument, encompasses the entire concept of fulfilling and attaining their personal goals, whatever they may be. From these responses certain themes and patterns emerged.

In analyzing the data, I selected quotes based on their frequency (those that appeared most often), salience (statements that offered rich detail, about which the respondent was remarkably passionate, or held deep and profound meaning), as well as those that were atypical (the exceptions to the patterns, those that differed from the others). In the sections that follow, I begin with an overview of the most frequent or "typical" responses, and then proceed with an examination of the emergent themes and patterns.

## Overview of Frequent Responses

### Definitions of "Success"

The first qualitative, open-ended question I asked inquired about the teenagers' definitions of success: "what does 'be a success' mean to you?" A frequent response included phrases referring to "achieving one's goals" and having a sense of "happiness." For example, Christine, a sophomore, explained that success is "being able to do what you want to do and achieving the goals that you have, and being happy with what you do. And if you set goals for yourself and in your job, then it's accomplishing everything you need to and everything you want to." Similarly, Clay, a senior, said, "Be happy with what you're doing. Period." Overall, a total of 46 of the 70 teenagers gave definitions of "success" similar to Christine, saying that they wanted to achieve their goals and be happy with themselves. As many of the youth defined "being a success" as a sort of self-realization, "being happy," or "setting goals for myself then achieving them." I followed up with open-ended questions such as, "what to do you think of when you hear the word 'success,'" or "what images come to mind when you think of this word?"

Some of the youth emphasized that they way that they define "success" contrasts with the definitions of "success" they receive from "society" [their words], their teachers and parents. Caitlin, a 17 year old, responded that success means to "be happy; to kind of accomplish goals that you have for yourself at whatever speed is right for you. It doesn't matter what society says. Whatever makes you feel happy, I think, is a success." Though Caitlin did not specify what messages she was receiving from "society," her response suggests that her personal definition of "being a success" is different from what she perceives to be the commonly held beliefs of success.

Next I asked two follow-up questions with the intention of further inquiring about the ways in which these teenagers defined success. I analyzed their responses from these three questions individually as well as holistically, so as to ascertain the patterns and themes as they emerged from the responses. After "what does 'be a success' mean to you?" I asked the following two questions: "In what ways do you personally hope to be successful?" and "Please describe someone (real or made up) who you consider to be an extremely successful individual." Below are some of the typical and frequently mentioned responses to the three questions.

**Visions of "Being Successful"**

The second free-response question was, "In what ways do you personally hope to be successful?" I would offer prompts including: "how do you see yourself as 'being ____'," (I would repeat the adjective they mentioned)? "what does this mean to you?," and "what are some of your own goals?" In answering this question the youth spoke of their future dreams and plans. Most often, they talked about achieving their own goals, again, contrasting them with the expectations that they perceived others to have of

them. Having money and wealth was addressed by many of the teenagers, and interestingly only six (three girls and three guys) indicated that being wealthy was a goal they sought. This corresponds to their responses to the quantitative goals, where just 5% said that "having lots of money" was "extremely important." Instead, a majority of those who mentioned financial assets emphasized that they were not important.

Other typical responses included speaking about the importance of "making a difference in the world," and "working to help others." This response was sometimes given in contrast to making money. For example, Kelsey said: "It's not about money or material things... I hope I can be successful by making a difference in the world and in my community." Another frequent response when talking about personal hopes for being successful involved work and career issues. Fully 47 out of 70 mentioned their professional goals, and about half of those spoke of a specific job or career. They tended to generalize about being accomplished in the workplace, as did Linda, who said, "I want to have a good job and I want to be happy with what I'm doing. Not work for money or whatever, just be happy." From this quote, we should conclude that students had not considered or decided what career path to follow, as all but ten named jobs when asked directly what they thought they might pursue as a career. Interestingly, although the students named occupations, many often mentioned more than one possibility or qualified their responses saying that they were not sure. Lastly, many of the youth specifically said that they wanted a good family life. For instance, Mike replied, "...hopefully getting married, having kids, a nice job, a steady job, making an average living...having a nice family..." The themes that emerged in response to this question parallel trend data which indicate ratings of self-realization and the importance of family have remained consistent over the past three decades.

**Models of "Successful" People**

The third open-ended question asked teenagers to identify someone whom they personally considered successful. The person could either be real or made-up. The examples they described fell into seven categories. The most common response was "parents," with fully 22 of the youth mentioning either their mom, dad, or both parents. The second most frequent response consisted of people who were philanthropic and dedicated to making a difference in the world; eight youth described persons who fit into this category. Of these, two said Mother Theresa (one girl and one guy), two described a man who runs a homeless shelter in a poverty-stricken urban area of Philadelphia, one heralded Madeline Albright for her ambassadorial and diplomatic actions, one praised John Graham Pole, an arts-in-medicine physician who is known locally as the "real life Patch Adams," one talked about Sister Hazel (not the music group, but rather the charitable woman for whom the band is named) who founded a local food pantry, and finally one guy said that Rebecca Brown, the director of the youth program, was his ideal of a successful person.

The third most common image of persons considered successful consisted of celebrities and wealthy individuals. Six of the youth offered examples of people with fame and fortune. Bill Gates, the owner of Microsoft and richest person in the world, was mentioned twice. Others included: Michael Jordan, the professional basketball player and team owner, Pat Matheny, a jazz musician, Ani DiFranco, an outspoken grassroots musician, and one girl described her own grandmother, emphasizing her "cultured" lifestyle, her wealth, and popularity as the wife of the executive of a large industrial company.

The final two categories of successful people consisted of other adults with whom they interacted; three students mentioned a teacher at school and three students

mentioned the parents of a friend. The explanations offered for selecting parents of friends as "models" of success noted their accomplishments in both professional and personal settings, indicating that they admired them for "having it all." For example, Tyson, a senior, defined his friend's dad as a success due to the fact that he was "doing well in his job while having a happy marriage and kids... yet having time to travel and enjoy themselves and making efforts to be generous to those in need."

**Emergent Themes**

I attempted to be as open as possible when looking at the interview data, allowing categories to naturally emerge rather than constructing categories to affix to the responses, or assigning them preconceived labels. I created the MTF sub-sample with the intention of matching certain characteristics of the sample of youth who I observed and interviewed. I hypothesized that these demographic traits and characteristics might be associated with the importance ratings that young people give to future goals. Yet, for the purposes of the qualitative section of the study I relied on inductive reasoning, moving from specific observations to broader generalizations and constructing tentative theories. This "bottom up" approach was arguably more purposeful in my attempts to discover patterns in how the 70 teenagers defined "success" and spoke of the importance of various future goals in their lives. It is important to note that although I use the phrase "how they define success" the focus is not a discourse or conversation analysis of *how* their constructions of these concepts emerged during our interviews. Rather, in this study the focus is more on the *whats*, meaning the ways in which they define "success," what that concept actually means, and the specific future goals they mentioned–instead of looking at the *process* by which this occurs.

Five strong themes emerged, both in terms of frequency and saliency, when looking holistically at the definitions of success the teenagers described: self-realization

("achieving your goals, whatever they may be," "being happy with myself"), money (mentioned as both important and not at all important), philanthropy ("making a difference in the world," "helping people"), work/career issues ("doing well in my job," "having a career that I am good at and that I love"), and connecting with family and friends ("having a good marriage," "having a nice family," "being close with my family and friends"). After analyzing the qualitative data I went back to the numerical results from the MTF data to produce the statistical tables. When looking at the 12 goals about which MTF asked its participants, I attempted to place them into a tentative thematic order so that the tables would be more accessible to the readers; MTF listed the goals in what appears to be a rather "random" order, jumping from the importance of careers to families to finances. I began rearranging the goals so that they were listed next to goals of similar topics. What resulted was a list of 12 goals which clearly fit into 4 themes: career/financial, relationships, self-realization, philanthropy. I was surprised to discover that the MTF goals fell into a system of categorization almost identical to what emerged from the interviews I conducted. Again, this parallel was not something that I planned nor imposed as part of the study design.

To further bolster this point, the statistics of importance ratings from MTF (both the overall and matching samples) indicated that the theme of goals least likely to be rated as quite or extremely important were the goals dealing with philanthropy and social justice. The goals most likely to be rated extremely important dealt with relationships and families, closely followed by careers and finances. This echoes the findings of the existing literature on trends, which indicate that "family goals" and "personal self-fulfillment" goals have consistently been rated as highly important over the past three decades. Yet the importance of "public interest" goals has decreased dramatically while "private materialism" has increased to all time highs. Easterlin and Crimmins (1991)

assigned the 14 MTF goals to four categories (in order to correlate them with a study on college students' goals) with different titles, but conceptualizations identical to the themes I created for MTF as well as the patterns which emerged from my interviews. This leads to speculation that these conceptualizations have some degree of internal consistency.

Each of the five themes that emerged from looking at the interviews, observations, and interactions holistically–self-realization, money, philanthropy, work/career issues, and connecting with family and friends–is explored below.

**Self-Realization**

Almost every teenager I spoke to mentioned "achieving their own goals" or "being happy" as an initial response to both of the questions about defining "success" and how they personally hoped to be "successful." As previously mentioned, a total of 46 of the 70 students gave such definitions of "success," emphasizing personal fulfillment and satisfaction. This category of self-realization can further be divided into three substantive bins: being happy with yourself, pursuing own personal goals regardless of others, and finding a place in life.

In the first sub-category of self-realization, we can see how Miriam and Chad utilized this notion of being happy with yourself:

> I think that to be a success you have to be happy with yourself, you're not being a success for somebody else or anybody else, you know. Like you have to be really happy at what you're doing...I think it mostly just has to do with making yourself happy at what you do... (Miriam, junior)

> I think it's probably like more of a personal thing. You have goals of your own, and if you fulfill your goals you are a success. (Chad, senior)

Clearly, both Miriam and Chad see success as being happy with yourself and view it as an individual achievement. This is evident in the language choice of "personal thing," which suggests that success is an accomplishment that can be personally evaluated.

Pursuing own personal goals regardless of others is the second sub-category of self-realization. Andrew and Kimberly defined success in terms of self-realization, giving priority to their own opinions and discarding those of others:

> Some of it has to [be] your own personal goals. If you feel fulfilled within yourself, if you feel that you're a success, then you're a success. If you feel happy with yourself and feel that you have done the best you can then that's it. (Andrew, senior)

> I think to be a success is different for everyone. It just depends on what you want to do, what your goals are, like if you want to help people or if you want to get a lot of money... To be a success to me would be to be happy in what I do, which could be a lot of different things. (Kimberly, junior)

Like Miriam and Chad in the previous quotes, both Andrew and Kimberly contrast their opinions of themselves with what they perceive to be the judgments of others, emphasizing that it is their own definitions that take precedence. This factor becomes especially salient when we recall that the students being interviewed are in high school–a time in which the judgments of others are often powerful influences.

The final sub-category of self-actualization is finding one's place in life. Lily (senior) states that success is "...finding my place in life. Finding out what makes me the most happy, and figuring out what my dreams are and then fulfilling them." Unlike the previous two sub-categories of self-actualization, Lily is referring to processes of discovery as opposed to simply a state of happiness.

**Money**

Having money and wealth was addressed by 36 of the teenagers. Unlike the trends from MTF which indicate that fully 63% of all American teenagers, and over half

of those who are white and privileged consider "having lots of money" quite or extremely important, just under one-quarter of the youth I spoke with agreed. Only 5% of that group said it was "extremely important" to have lots of money. Moreover, only six of those (three girls and three guys) mentioned in the interview that being wealthy was a goal they sought.

Few of the teenagers involved with Sonlight emphasized that being wealthy was very important to them. This is contrary to trend data as well as popular stereotypes of American youth as being materialistic consumers and rather selfish. Only one of the students offered a response that seemed consistent with such images of "superficiality." Felicia (senior) stated:

> In my own view being a success means that I could have, not whatever I wanted, but almost. Like, the freedom to do what I want. So if I wanted to take a trip to this place I could do it, or if I wanted to have a house that looked like this kind of thing, I could have it. I guess it would be more of a material success. And also, like recognition from society... I would rather have [a job] where I'm known in the business community that I work in... I think my grandmother is very successful... everyone likes her, she's the kind of person that you want to get along with... She's just a person you wish you were like. She's popular, cultured.

Again, Felicia is echoing the dominant stereotype that depicts teenagers as being materialistic and self-centered. She relies on language that is often associated with popular youth culture in a negative way, calling to mind images of superficiality and shallowness with her mention of wanting to be "popular." In her response, Felicia is associating success with being socially popular.

Unlike Felicia, a larger proportion, about 20%, said that they would like to have a "reasonable amount" of money when they grow up. They used such phrases to define "reasonable" as "not rich, but secure." Apparently this is an effort to contrast being "stable and happy" with being either extremely wealthy or living in poverty. For example, three students commented:

> You know, of course you're going to want money and everything, but you want money with the other stuff too, cause then it's not a full success... I'd want to live in a big town, with a good paying job and, like, a respectable job. I think that would be pretty much a success for me... [An example of successful person is] Well, probably my neighbors. Because they're very rich, well not very rich, but they have good support with money and they go on a lot of family trips and they're really close as a family... well they're both really good parents and everything and they have nice cars and a nice house and stuff like that... (Lauri, sophomore)

> [I'll feel like I'm a success] basically if I'm satisfied with where I'm going with stuff, not really as much like if I have a really big house, more if I have the basic stuff, I'll feel successful. (Elena, first year)

> [Being a success is] not necessarily monetarily, but to just be happy and content with what I have... I think I'll describe somebody who is successful... [Friend's father] is very happy, and I think that it's because he's not completely tied down with his job. He has enough money where he can go and do other stuff like he has his boat down in the Keys. (Tyson, senior)

Above we see these students describing success as attaining "reasonable" but not "excessive" standard of living. It's likely that this conceptualization reflects their family's socioeconomic status.

Contrary to both the trend data and comparisons to the entire MTF (representing "average" U.S. high school students) and matching MTF (higher SES white students), a majority of the youth with whom I spoke that mentioned having lots of money did so negatively. That is, they said that having financial assets was not a goal of importance to them. Statistically, 22% of the youth indicated that having lots of money was not a goal to which they aspired (versus 7.5% of the matching MTF and 5.8% of the overall MTF), and fully 23% mentioned that they did not consider having money to be important while replying to the open-ended questions about defining success and their own personal goals. Two teenagers commented:

> I think a lot of people think success is having money, living in a fancy house, but to me it's just to be happy and like what you do and feel good about what you're doing... to have something to

> show for what I did, not just like money, but to like to have the feeling, like pride. (Heather, senior)
>
> I think you can be successful and not earn a lot of money. (Jessica, senior)

Similar to Heather and Jessica, Anna and Wesley both assert that their main priority is not related to finances. Additionally, Anna and Wesley contend that not only is money not the primary focus, but they instead conceptualize success as having quality relationships with people.

> I think it means to me being happy. Not letting money, or material success is so beyond there. I think that having a good family and loving people around me... I want to be someone who is successful as far as happiness, and helping others. That's what I want to do really badly, is like to do something with missions or something. That would be really successful to me, even it's little money, it's the stuff you get out of it is so much more important. (Anna, first year)
>
> [Being a success is] to just do as much as you can. Personally? I hope to make a contribution to society in some way where I can help people out. Wow, that's really vague.... And I mean, when it comes down to it what's the world about, it's not about how much money you have or anything like that, it's about how you interact with people. (Wesley, senior)

Having outlined the three sub-categories of the financial success theme, it is notable that the students de-emphasize money. This is an interesting finding when we recall that these students are mostly from affluent backgrounds. Coming from privileged positions, this lack of material focus is important because we can speculate that these students may be taking for granted their class status. These young people may assume that they will achieve the same economic security with which they've grown up.

**Philanthropy ("making a difference in the world")**

I mentioned previously that the second most frequent description of a "successful" person (second only to "parents") fell into the category of philanthropists

and people who dedicate their lives to helping others. Not only did the youth I spoke with offer people who work for change as their images of very successful people, 86% of the youth interviewed rated "making a contribution to society" as quite or extremely important, versus two-thirds of the matching MTF and 63% of the of the representative sample of American teenagers. Examining the qualitative interview responses offers insight into the ways in which the youth involved in Sonlight discussed and underscored the importance of contributing to society. This is evident in the statements by Kelsey and Chance. Kelsey (sophomore) remarks, "I hope that I can be successful by making a difference in the world and in my community." Similarity, Chance (sophomore) shared, "I guess just to be good in the community and to be what you can be. More than like having lots of money....[being a success includes] making a contribution."

Readers may recall that one of the teenagers, Wesley, selected the director of Sonlight, Brown, as his ideal example of a successful person:

> [I chose Brown as an example of someone who is successful] because she is affecting people's lives on a daily basis. And what she's doing is she is making a profound effect, getting people to open up in their lives and getting people to see the beauty in certain things. And that's success if anything...She's the best person in the world I know at doing that kind of stuff. (Senior)

Further in his interview, it became evident that Wesley viewed Brown as embodying the ideal of someone dedicated to positively affecting the lives of others. Not only did some of the youth say they thought it was important to better the world, along with other goals, but a surprising number stated that they hoped to dedicate their lives to working for change.

> To personally achieve those things you believe you can do to better the world, depending upon your morals, beliefs, and abilities. I want to get to the end of my life and feel like I made a difference in the world, even if just in one person's life. I want to leave something of myself that is eternal. That would make me a success, I believe. (Eden, senior)

> To me, success would be living in a small house amongst like a poor neighborhood, and kind of like the Philadelphia thing, leaving it open and letting anybody and everybody who wanted to come in come in....[My example of someone who is successful] is that Shawn guy in Philadelphia, who lives in a house with 600 individuals called the Simple Way and lives to the best of his ability how Jesus would live. I think he's successful, not because he has money or friends, but because he's helping others and he's accepting of everybody. (Paige, senior)

Eden and Paige articulated their convictions to devote their lives to make a difference. There are many ways in which one can engage in philanthropic behaviors, such as donating money to charities, volunteering one's time, and sharing one's resources with those in need. Research on philanthropy suggests though most Americans engage in charitable activities, it is done sporadically (Pew Partnership for Civic Change, 2002).

**Work = Contributing to Society**

Extending the previous sub-category, philanthropy can further be conceptualized as a comprehensive commitment to which one's life is dedicated. One of the ways in which a person can enact this desire to make a difference is to pursue a career in which their primary responsibility involves being engaged in such activities. Recalling that fully 86% of the youth interviewed stressed the importance of making a contribution to society, it may not be surprising that almost one-quarter indicate they plan to pursue a career focusing on philanthropic objectives.

Specifically, six girls and one guy reported aspiring to work in places like urban clinics, rural medicine, serve in the Peace Corps, or other community focused careers. Approximately one-quarter of the youth expressed an interest in helping others through careers in medicine. Additionally, ten percent said they hoped to impact the lives of children through teaching. These two students expressed the importance of dedicating their life, including their career, to working for change:

> I want to be a teacher and band director. So I hope to make a contribution by helping others succeed in their goals. And measure my success by the amount of success that they achieve. (Clay, senior)

> I want to be a credit to society. I know that I definitely want to do something in the health profession... I hope to be successful at whatever career I choose to do and be a successful aspect to my society by helping make it a better place to live. (Caroline, junior)

**Connecting with Family and Friends**

Over 90% of American teenagers surveyed in MTF assert that future goals pertaining to their relationships with others are quite or extremely important. Recall that trend data show that over the past three decades students' ratings of making a contribution to society have consistently decreased, while their evaluations of having lots of money has increased. Unlike these dramatic patterns, young people have consistently rated connecting with others as a top priority. Results from the interviews I conducted are consistent with the national data. Almost all of the youth with whom I spoke expressed a desire to have good relationships with their friends and family. The guys were just as likely as the girls to state that they aspire to have strong personal relationships. In the following four quotes, we see three guys assert that family is important to their conception of success:

> I guess for me I would like to do some good music sometime in my life, and maybe invent something or support my family or something like that... [someone who] has a nice little family going on... (Paul, sophomore)

> I hope to have a nice family and have a nice job that I enjoy working at. (Brian, first year)

> [I hope to be successful by] helping my friends and family as much as possible... (Brad, sophomore)

> I think I want to have close relationships like I know with my brothers, they're older, but I really want to have close relationships with my family and stay in contact a lot. Like friendship-wise I'd

> want to make that a success and family-wise, with my own family and kids too... (Lauri, sophomore)

We can see that success is not just about money or careers, as it involves multiple other goals: making contributions to society, connecting with others, and making a difference in the world. Some of the youth articulated a definition of success that encompassed many of the aforementioned goals. As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, success cannot be reduced to a singular achievement. In the previous section on the differing significance of finances, Tyson expresses his definition of success as someone who has it all, in his words, a "Renaissance man." Wendy parallels this view in her desire to be successful in many ways:

> [Personally, I hope to be a success by] graduating from college and getting a job and making an adequate amount of money to support a family, getting married and having a family and being successful with that... And probably having a really good relationship with my kids when they're teenagers...I'm not exactly sure how, but I hope to do something with my life that reaches people. (Wendy, sophomore)

We have examined five key themes the teenagers expressed of what it means to be a success. In review, these five themes are: self-realization ("achieving your goals, whatever they may be," "being happy with myself"), money (mentioned as both important and not at all important), philanthropy ("making a difference in the world," "helping people"), work/career issues ("doing well in my job," "having a career that am good at and that I love"), and connecting with family and friends ("having a good marriage," "having a nice family," "being close with my family and friends"). This chapter will close with an examination of responses that were less frequently mentioned, but were said with salience and emphasis, including a discussion of unexpected findings in relation to gender. These provide interesting insights as to teenagers' definitions of success and their goals for the future.

## Infrequent but Salient Responses

### Nontraditional Gender Aspirations

Another interesting finding pertaining to gender is that all of the girls who participated in the study mentioned their career and work aspirations as being an important part of their definition of success and personal future goals. Just a few decades ago, young women were only one-quarter as likely to major in math and science as were young men (Dey & Hurtaldo, 1999). A surprisingly large amount, exactly 50% of the girls in my study, specified their interests as possible career paths in medicine, engineering, computers, and other scientific and technological fields. This certainly contradicts the existing literature on adolescent girls and self-confidence in relation to mathematic and scientific fields (see for example Gilligan, 1990). Not only did girls in this study challenge traditional notions of gender roles, 8 of the 17 guys planned to pursue "care-taking" jobs and 11 said they hoped to have "a nice family." For example, Wesley said, "[Success means to me] to be a father. To be a husband and good at that too...I really do want to be a father and a husband and I want to be able to give my family opportunities." This quote from Wesley is linked to the emphasis he placed on wanting to better society, as part of his fulfillment of being a husband and father. Like Wesley, the guys in the study were not talking about the "good provider role," as sociologists traditionally conceptualize it in terms of economic contributions (see Bernard 1984). Instead these guys were referring to an expanded role, including active involvement in the lives of their own families as well as responsibility for humankind. Traditionally, the gender role for men has de-emphasized the value of helping and nurturing.

Similar to the nontraditional aspirations of the guys I interviewed, an interesting finding regarding girls' expectations for their roles in the future emerged, specifically,

their aspirations and plans to be financially independent. For example, three girls explain their hopes to someday support themselves:

> I hope to be independent someday. I hope to be able to support myself. And have a job that I love, and have hobbies and travel a lot... live that kind of lifestyle. (Caitlin, junior)

> I just want to graduate from high school and then graduate from college, and have a family, have a good job and not have to depend on anyone, like a man or anything like that for money or anything like that. (Madeline, sophomore)

> [Personally I hope to be successful by] figuring out what my dreams are (and fulfilling them). I also want to have enough money to take care of myself financially, so that I won't ever have to rely on anyone else (like a husband) to support me. Although I DO really, really, really hope I find the right guy to marry someday, and have a family. (Lily, senior)

Gender roles have changed in the past few decades, and many women are attaining college educations and even choosing to remain single (Dey & Hurtaldo, 1999). When these girls' statements are placed within a context recognizing changing gender roles, their comments do not seem so atypical. In one specific case, one girl described not only wanting to be independent and empowered, but also to have power and influence over someone else. I recognize that this girl's accounts of her future plans are not typical, yet it reveals an notable exception. According to Wendy:

> [When I think of success I think of someone who is] making an adequate amount of money to support a family, getting married and having a family and being successful with that. Personally? I guess to... this is a really weird one, but to be richer than my husband is a big thing for me. To have the power over him. (Wendy, sophomore)

**Aspirations of Gender-Matched Parent**

Fully 22 of the youth interviewed (19 girls and 3 guys) replied that they considered their own parents to represent what it means to be "successful." Gender seemed to be related to their responses to this question. Nine girls said that their mother

was the image of success that came to mind. Those girls who selected their mothers spoke of how their moms managed both career and family life. For example, Elena, a ninth grader in the International Baccalaureate program, said:

> Well actually I think my mom is one of the most successful people I know. She used to be an English teacher for high school, and she wasn't really happy with it. I guess she was making enough money but she wasn't happy. But now she is a doctor because she went back to school and she felt like she needed to, like she wasn't really happy with what she was doing, and I mean it was kind of hard for a while with all the school and always working or studying and money was tight and everything. But now we're fine and she's content with her work and is a good mom, and is happy with my dad, and she's also making money if that matters at all. But I think she's one of the most successful people I know.

An additional four girls mentioned their parents as symbolizing successful people. Sophia, whose mother is a professor and director of a research center at UF and whose father is a chief physician at the health center, responded that her parents are the epitome of being successful. She explains, "I think my parents are both extremely successful. They're happy and they like their jobs. They live every day very ready to work and stuff. So I guess they're pretty successful." Sophia's description of her parents speaks only to their happiness and career achievements. Surprisingly, even though the ideal images she offered were her own family members, the importance of family involvement was not apparent in her explanation of why she considered them to be successful individuals. Six girls and 3 guys offered their fathers as examples of successful persons. Max, a ninth grader whose father is chair of a department in the medical school, states:

> I'm going to have to go with my dad. He's got a nice solid job, he likes what he does, he's got a nice family. He's got three nice boys, especially the youngest one [laughing]. He has a sense of what he needs and what he wants. He's got a sense of who he is and what he needs to do to keep what he likes going.

Again, Max offers a description of a person valuing both their career and family. When comparing the responses of the girls who spoke of their parents (mom, dad, or both) and the guys who did the same, the notable difference seems to be in relation to gender. Nine girls talked about their mothers (the same gender parent) and 3 guys mentioned their fathers. Yet six girls spoke of their fathers (the parent of the other gender) but not a single guy reported their mother to be the image of success that came to mind. Finally, while four girls mentioned both of their parents (one specified her grandparents), not a single guy talked about both of his parents. Again, though 10 girls offered their fathers (either alone or in the context of "parents") as the image of success, mothers were not spoken of by sons.

**Religion and "Serving Others"**

Concluding this chapter, the last notable exception that emerged from this study relates to religion, spirituality, and values. As previously mentioned, the youth organization, Sonlight, in which the youth who participated in this study were involved, is based at a United Methodist Church. Just over one-half of students who took part in the program had families who were members of this Methodist church. Persons not familiar with this program might expect a majority or at least at least some of the youth to mention references to religion and the importance of spirituality. However, this only occurred in three instances. Anna, Jill, and Paige speak to having goals that evoke religious notions. For example, Anna (first year) explained that she was not sure what she wanted to do with her life, but one of the options she was considering was being a missionary:

> I want to be someone who is successful as far as happiness, and helping others. That's what I want to do really badly, is like to do something with missions or something. That would be really successful to me, even

> it's little money, it's the stuff you get out of it is so much more important.

She talked about doing missions in order to "help others." Similarly, Jill (junior) said that her vision of being a success includes becoming a youth minister. Jill, like Anna, focused on the career choice of youth minister as an opportunity to connect with young people, as she says, "to help make other people happy." Finally, Paige (junior) articulates her goals to serve other people as she responds:

> ...right now I'm thinking about maybe going into building and construction and doing some type of ministry with that. Like just going and getting the knowledge and then I would be able to help. There's a lot of people who don't live like in full houses, and not just the urban poverty, but rural poverty really needs some help... I think being a success to me would mean being happy and content with yourself. I think, well, I'm trying to work to be a follower of Jesus and so for me I think being a success would be someone who, when I'm happy and content with myself, thinking that I am following Jesus, when I'm doing what I think he would do. And so like, to me success would be living in a small house amongst like a poor neighborhood, and kind of like the Philadelphia thing [a project called 'Simple Way' that works with the homeless in inner-city Philadelphia], leaving it open and letting anybody and everybody who wanted to come in come in.

In the examples above, we can see how these youth talk of their goals of dedicating their lives to helping people and evoke careers in churches (working in missions, youth minister, and serving impoverished people, "like Jesus") as means of making a difference and connecting with others. Not specifically during these interviews, but during my conversations and the participant observation portion of this study, it became clear that mention of religion and spirituality were all about helping others and making a difference in the world.

## Summary

In the concluding chapter I will discuss the implications of the findings of this research, exploring possible explanations for why the youth involved in this study were

much more concerned with making a contribution to society than are "average" American youth, as indicated by the statistics from MTF. Even when controlling for demographic characteristics such as racial identity and socioeconomic status, the teenagers involved with Sonlight placed much more emphasis on the importance of helping others and working to benefit society while discounting the importance of having lots of money, than do students of similar backgrounds. I will close by discussing attributes of the youth program in which they participate as a possible explanation for this discrepancy; Sonlight as a sort of "values education."

# CHAPTER 7
# CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this concluding chapter I will discuss the implications of the findings of this research, exploring possible explanations for why the youth involved in this study were much more concerned with making a contribution to society than are "average" American youth, as indicated by the statistics from MTF. Even when controlling for demographic characteristics such as racial identity and socioeconomic status, the teenagers involved with Sonlight placed much more emphasis on the importance of helping others and working to benefit society while discounting the importance of having lots of money, than do students of similar backgrounds. I will close by discussing attributes of the youth program in which they participated as a possible explanation for this discrepancy; Sonlight as a sort of "values education."

Popular images and stereotypes depict today's teenagers as being focused on "making lots of money" and "being a success in their line of work," rather than helping others and valuing quality family life. Results from the quantitative portion of this study support this notion as survey results from MTF (1999) indicate that over 89% of American teenagers considered being a success in their careers quite or extremely important, whereas only 22% of those youth said it was important to "make a contribution to society." This recent phenomenon is evidenced in an examination of trend data which indicated these statistics have "flipped" since the late 1960s, when 24% of teenagers considered financial goals such as "being a success" extremely important, while more than 85% thought it important to "make a contribution to society."

These numbers paint a picture of young people that I found to be inconsistent with the students I came in contact with during my experience working with a local youth organization, Sonlight. A possible explanation for the disparity between the results from the overall MTF and the youth with whom I worked was that the young persons involved in Sonlight were a select group in terms of their demographic characteristics. In order to test this, I created a sub-sample of MTF which was restricted to high school students who were white, higher SES, and who expected to graduate from college. This restriction enabled me to use the probability sample of MTF to approximate the demographic characteristics of the Sonlight youth. Results from this matching MTF sample showed a narrowing difference between the importance the young people placed on various future goals. Specifically, the majority of students in the matching MTF sample rated financial and career goals as quite or extremely important, compared to just under 25% who indicated that philanthropic goals were important. These students were, however, more likely to report that "having lots of money" was not important, and less likely to view "making a contribution to society" as not important.

Results from the interviews I conducted were more like those of the matching MTF than the overall MTF. About 80-90% of teenagers in American society (overall MTF: 89%, matching MTF: 89%, Sonlight: 83%) indicated that "being a success in their line of work" was quite or extremely important. Almost half of the youth I interviewed said that "making a contribution to society" was extremely important, and not even one-quarter of the youth in a nationally representative sample agreed with this statement. Fully 22% of the Sonlight participants stated that "having lots of money" was not important, compared with the 8% of young people of matching demographic characteristics and just 6% of all American teenagers. Clearly, matching demographics

do not necessarily account for the variation between the Sonlight members and a probability sample of all American youth.

These survey results served as a framework, providing the context for the in-depth interviews I conducted with 70 local high school students, all members of the same youth organization, Sonlight. Although the survey data provide telling statistics–that "being a success" is very important to young people–it does not explain *what* they mean by "being a success." In an attempt to explain why the 70 teenagers I surveyed were less concerned with material and financial wealth and more concerned with making a difference in the world than the average teenager, I asked them to define and give examples of "being a success." Five themes emerged: self-realization ("achieving your goals, whatever they may be," "being happy with myself"), money (mentioned as both important and not at all important), philanthropy ("making a difference in the world," "helping people"), work/career issues ("doing well in my job," "having a career that am good at and that I love"), and connecting with family and friends ("having a good marriage," "having a nice family," "being close with my family and friends"). The images of "being a success" that emerged from the in-depth interviews indicate that these youth had future goals and values that were vastly different from the norm. This concluding chapter explores the notion that their experience in Sonlight affected their future goals and values.

## Sonlight as a Values Education

### Overview of Program

Sonlight was a rather atypical youth program. From the outside, it would appear to be a church-based choir, performing primarily secular songs accompanied by talented musicians. People who were present at performances or who heard recordings of

Sonlight's music insisted it was a group of extraordinarily trained musicians, the best of the best from area schools, selected to participate by audition. They were shocked to find out that there were no requirements to be a part of the program–any interested high school student needed simply to attend a rehearsal in order to join. About half of the members were musically inclined and were drawn to the program in hopes of performing. The other half were certainly attracted to the music as it was a primary feature of the program, but they came for other reasons as well. About 2/3 of the students participated in Sonlight because they had grown up in the church. The other 1/3 did not grow up in the church–some were members of other local churches or synagogues, and some did not identify with any religious faith. At the beginning of each year, a small number of youth would be "sent" by their parents. However, Brown, the director, specifically asked parents not to "force" their sons or daughters to come, as she felt it essential that this be something they did by choice. The teenagers came for all sorts of reasons: the music, the friends, the summer tour, the service projects. A saying emerged among those who were familiar with the program, 'they came for the music and the friendships... but they stayed for the Focus.

People often assumed that Sonlight was merely a youth church choir that happened to have more than a hundred talented teenagers as members, due to its location at a large Methodist church. From this assumption, it would logically follow that any teachings that occurred within the program would be religious (specifically Protestant Christian and Methodist) in nature. Although Sonlight was housed at and supported by the United Methodist Church, the teachings were in fact pluralistic. The young people who participated were not required to take part in any service, nor were they even asked to become "Christians." The message was one of interfaith spirituality–that "god's stuff" is in everything, from the lyrics of the latest pop song, to the

books read in literature class. It is important to reiterate that Sonlight emphasized spirituality instead of religion. In preparing the content of weekly discussions ("Focuses"), the director was just as likely to draw from the works of Henry David Thoreau, Mother Theresa, Brown Luther King Jr., the Dalai Lama, Ghandi, William James, Sting, or Thomas Merton as she was the teachings of John Wesley and Jesus. She encouraged critical thinking, as the purpose of these discussions was to not to indoctrinate the youth with a set of beliefs; instead she sought to challenge the youth to ask questions and seek the answers for themselves. She especially encouraged them to question the dominant messages from society's institutions: religion, education, the media, and their peers. The director has been quoted as saying,"I believe it is more important to teach them how to 'look' than to make Methodists or even Christians of them."

"Focus" was the term used for the discussions that took place in rehearsal each week, from which the "theme" of the year developed. They were typically about 15 minutes in length. Rather than a "boring lecture," Brown attempted to engage in discussion with 120+ teenagers. Focus was an integral part of Sonlight. As previously mentioned, an overwhelming majority of the youth indicated that the Focuses were the most meaningful aspect of the program. Though they may have initially been attracted to Sonlight because of the music and the people, the Focuses were what kept them coming. In an effort to reach the youth through as many avenues as possible, Brown used a variety of techniques such as illustrations, surveys, props, diagrams, guest speakers, panels, debates, and videos. Most Focuses were accompanied by a handout, and many members would take extra copies to share with their friends. The reason that Focuses were so popular was because they dared to talk about the issues and ask the questions in which the youth were most interested. She "spoke their language" and used

"their media" (popular music, movies, videos, etc.) in order to reach the teenagers, challenging them to think about their values, beliefs, priorities, and assumptions about the world. In this sense, Focuses were "values curricula."

**Focus as Values Curriculum**

At a time when the dominant values of American culture were largely fueled by the mass media, replete with messages equating "success" with individualistic and material goals, Sonlight was a unique environment where these values and goals could be questioned. As previously mentioned, few if any other legitimate spaces for discussing such issues exist in the lives of most young people in America today. During Focus time, youth were encouraged to not only think critically, but to consider their place in the world from a larger perspective. This method of teaching was a core component of Brown's overall approach to working with youth, but was especially salient during 1999, the year in which I conducted the interviews. Unlike the pedantic methods employed in public schools, the Focus time not only allowed but encouraged the youth to ask questions–to explore perspectives and experiences other than their own. (It is important to reiterate here that the young people involved in Sonlight were privileged, white, college-bound students with somewhat homogenous life experiences.)

The reason this program was effective was because Brown did not preach the rejection of all popular media. Instead, she taught young people to search for messages which communicated values of altruism, compassion, activism, and service. When selecting songs for the choir to perform and resources to utilize during Focus discussions, Brown purposely chose those produced by popular musicians and celebrities which purported humanistic values and goals. Furthermore, Brown herself was recognized by several of the youth interviewed as a model of someone who was "making a contribution to society" through her work as director of the program.

The Focus themes were the core of Sonlight's program each year. The songs that the students performed were individually selected for the way in which they related to the overall theme. Every week the Focus discussion examined messages in the lyrics from the songs that the students were learning, or incorporated other media and activities in order to spur discussion. Brown said,

> The music was the vehicle for discussion. There was a different theme each year. The youth and graduates of the program submitted secular rock songs that reflected the theme (many more than could be used). I selected twenty-five songs from 200+ submissions–songs that best taught the spiritual principles we wanted to explore that year. Among the themes we covered: Making faith street sensible; the brevity of life; taking the road less traveled; bridging gaps of race, nationality, and income; understanding AIDS; sexual, physical, and emotional abuse in the home; drugs, alcohol, and eating disorders and how youth make relationships with substances; homosexuality; natural "highs;" how Jesus' teaching gives flight to life–not weight; the essence of believing–what is it?; communication; change; the power of relationships (with self, stranger, family, friends, and God); perspective, and how it affects the way we view everything; and taking risks. The lyrics would guide us into topics, questions and projects. We had special guests that included Vietnam veterans, family therapists, high school guidance counselors, Dr. Paul Doering (renowned pharmaceutical professor-on drugs), educators, activists, environmentalists, actors from the Hippodrome State Theatre to perform monologues and sketches, panel discussions with the elderly, and sometimes with our parents. In 1998 we were privileged to meet with Sister Helen PreJean (of Dead Man Walking). These are the experiences that so many say they remember (2002).

Though each year had its own "Focus theme" with corresponding songs, activities, and lessons, there were a handful of select Focus lessons that were repeated year after year. For example, each Fall, the first rehearsal included a Focus entitled *Emergency Room Clinic*. This Focus consisted of Brown laying basic "ground rules" and sharing with the youth her philosophy that the purpose of the program was to be a sort

of "safe place" or ER; a place where they did not need to pretend that they "had it all together." During this discussion she stated that Sonlight was a place where they could bring their problems without fear of judgement. This Focus had the effect of differentiating Sonlight from most other of the activities in which the youth were involved, and Brown from other adults. It was Brown's intention that this Focus establish the notion that Sonlight was not like their school classrooms and she was not like their parents or teachers, enforcing rules. Also, she encouraged the students to avoid judging each other, and instead look at each other with compassion and understanding. This is in stark contrast to the typical high school scene, replete with cliques and social castes; youth culture is often known for being exclusive, creating much angst and pain. Thus, Brown offered the *Emergency Room Clinic* Focus at the beginning of each year in an attempt to establish the "norms" of the program.

Another Focus that was mentioned each year was entitled "Convictions or Post-it Notes" (see Appendix E for this essay written by Brown). This Focus reflected Brown's attempt to encourage the youth to think critically about the things with which they identified. The demonstration that accompanied this Focus was humorous, and thus effective and memorable. A volunteer (usually one of the student officers or Focus committee members) would stand in the front of the room, with post-it notes stuck all over their clothes and body. Each post-it note read a phrase, such as "good at math," "American," "Gator fan," "vote Democrat." Brown explained, "the way I see it, much of what we learn about anything merely gets tacked on us like post-it notes... the average teenager is a walking "post-it tree." This discussion emphasized that the messages teenagers often receive from their parents, teachers, peers, and the media regarding the ways in which they "should" behave and the things in which they "should" believe, are like post it notes–"stuck" to them as they go through life. Brown asked them to

examine their own post-it notes and think about why and how they had acquired each one, and whether or not they agreed with what it represented. It was not her objective to impose her personal convictions upon the youth, in the form of another post-it note, but to encourage them to think independently about the things they learned and whether or not they chose to "carry" those things with them.

Many teenagers grow up without being asked to question their assumptions and the labels they wear. Like ants marching, they fall into step, fulfilling the expectations of others, striving to embody the images of success perpetuated by the media. Sonlight was a "small world" in which questioning was not only okay, it was welcomed. As previously mentioned, Brown encouraged the students to ask, seek, and risk–to think critically about our culture and the "rat race" many are running. And, those youth who persisted in valuing money, fame, and power were not chastised–they were just encouraged to think critically about their choices. After doing so, many young people found that their desire for wealth and celebrity was really about their want for freedom and the luxury of leisure time to explore their interests. Related to the emphasis on critical thinking was the notion of perspective.

**Focus themes: perspective and risk**

**Perspective theme.** During the year in which this research was conducted (1999), the theme was "Perspective." The songs and activities revolved around various aspects of Perspective: defining, explaining, applying, and expounding on the importance of recognizing that people's lives are contextualized. According to Brown, in order to view a subject/idea/event in perspective one needs to place it in space and time. To give something its "relative importance," one measures personal value against universal spiritual value. An individual's birth date, birthplace, and upbringing create

his/her space, time, and value index. Achieving perspective begins by realizing that one's point of view is just that...a view from one point in space and time. It involves seeing one's part as a mere piece of the whole (1999). That summer, the youth traveled to Colorado for a "perspective jolt"–to see natural wonders that spanned across time and space, incomparable to those found in north central Florida, and to engage in activities and share experiences that emphasized a pluralistic point of view. As Brown explained, "a time and space perspective can be gained through education, travel, experience and variation. But a value perspective is not as easily won, often coming through loss or tragedy. Religion teaches us of spiritual truths, seeking to help us treasure and value that which transcends our cultural, temporal values. However, in much the same way that travel provides the real-life perspective that education cannot, so life-altering experiences can bring us to value what religious training can only recommend" (1999). The Focus theme of Perspective encouraged the youth to consider dominant values that they might take for granted, such as individuality, materialism, and competition–to instead try to "step out of their own shoes" and think from a different angle, one that views humanity as interconnected, and values such things as simplicity and philanthropy.

**Risk theme.** The Focus theme of Perspective led into the theme of "Risk" the following year; the two were logically connected. Perspective asked the youth to think about their identities, roles, experiences, and standpoints, and how they came to hold their corresponding beliefs, opinions, and values. Risk was a challenge, a dare, to the youth to work to achieve their goals and dreams. According to Brown, "each of us has been given the basic capital–the ability to think, love, dream, believe... How do we play it? Life. Will we risk love or will we retreat, aghast at the darkness in our world? Will we risk a dream, or tell our grandchildren about what 'could have been'?" (2000).

Arguably, the prevailing images of "being a success" that existed in American society in the late 1990s were that of money, technology, and speed. Many believed that to keep up with the Joneses they must drive a BMW, wear the latest fashions from the Gap, and work their way up the corporate ladder. The corresponding script dictated how to achieve these goals: do well in school, be involved in extracurricular activities, display leadership qualities, go to college, work hard, land a well-paying job, and have relationships with significant others. During the Risk Focus theme, the youth discussed their aspirations and hopes for the future. The song "Ants Marching" by Dave Matthews Band was performed and the lyrics were examined. The message of this song and the corresponding Focus was to challenge the youth to dare to strive for their dreams. During this Focus Brown asked questions such as, What do you want to be when you grow up? Can you hear the beat of your inner drummer? What bugs you about the world? What is your passion? Listen to the voice within yourself, don't just ignore it... Do a morality check: Do your dreams step on others? Brown spoke of a "risk quotient," a capacity within each individual to "go for it." The next week they spoke about another Dave Matthews song, "Dancing Nancies," with the line, "could I have been anything other than me?" For many youth today the thought of their future is paralyzing. They are so stressed under the expectations that their parents and teachers have of them–working to get good grades and high scores on standardized exams. The students were encouraged to not give up on their dreams. They talked about famous people who had tried and failed, then tried and succeeded.

**The Importance of Sonlight as a Values Education Program**

As previously mentioned, Sonlight was an atypical youth program. From the outside, it appeared to be a church youth choir, performing primarily secular songs accompanied by talented musicians. This, however, was not considered the prevailing

feature by those who were involved with the program. Former members (as well as their parents and family) recall with great import the effect this program had on their lives; moreover, they often boast about being privileged to have had such a significant (and for many, life changing) experience.

**Case Studies Exemplifying the Effectiveness of Sonlight as a Values Education**

Sonlight was a positive experience in the lives of those who participated, but there also seems to be evidence that it has had a lasting effect beyond graduation from the program. Although I did not specifically gather data to measure this, I can provide some telling examples of how the values education experience in Sonlight contributed to the life path of many young people. Through my continued involvement with the program and with those who have graduated, I know of quite a few young adults who attest to the significant impact that participating in Sonlight had on their lives. It would not be presumptuous to assert that over the course of its 20 years, Sonlight touched the lives of at least 1000 young people in this community. Brown designed and coordinated the program in such a way that the youth were leaders, taking the initiative to shape each years' Focus theme and corresponding songs and activities. This resulted in a program where the students were empowered as leaders and felt a sense of ownership and pride. Sonlight gave young people the opportunity to Sonlight not only as talented musicians and performers, but also as leaders. Operating under her philosophy of the importance giving of "unconditional love" to young people, Brown established Sonlight as a "safe place," and in doing so, helped youth find the confidence they needed to believe in their own abilities and attempt risking their dreams.

During the time in which this study was conducted, the themes of the program were directly related to future goals and values. There is evidence that Sonlight

operated as a sort of "values education" experience in the lives of many of the youth who participated, and in the following section I will offer a few examples to illustrate. These examples are significant, but certainly it would be irresponsible to claim that they are statistically significant and represent the experiences of every youth who was involved in Sonlight. I am not asserting that being a member of Sonlight necessarily changed the life of each young person that took part in the program. Nor is there any proof that being exposed to the values education offered in Sonlight is the only factor that affected the goals and outcomes of these youth. Arguably the goals and values of young people are effected by a multitude of factors, including but not limited to: their early childhood experiences, family setting, ascribed attributes such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, religious traditions, relationships with friends, exposure to culture, involvement in activities, etc. (and it is quite possible that some young people joined Sonlight because they were attracted to the perspective on values and goals that it offered). Consistent with the constructivist and interactionist perspectives mentioned earlier, young people are constantly in the process of becoming–affected by all they encounter, actively constructing and mediating the self they live by (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Thus, I mention the following examples with the knowledge that they are not definitive.

Many of the youth involved in Sonlight indicated that their definitions of success pertained to philanthropic and self-realizing goals, consistent with the values discussed during Focuses. Through my continued involvement with some of the graduates, I am aware of quite a few who have made life choices consistent with those goals and values, and would specifically attest to their experience in Sonlight as having affected those decisions (by reinforcing goals and values they had tentatively considered, asking them to think critically about goals and values they took for granted, or exposing them to them

to new goals and values). For example, during our interview, Leslie said she wanted to dedicate her life to helping other people, mentioning Madeline Albright as her model of success. Leslie reported that she wanted to be head of the United Nations Human Rights Committee. Today, she is about to complete a degree in International Relations at Barnard College and is pursuing a path consistent with her goals and values. Another graduate, Aaron, just completed a year with Americorps and has plans to serve with the Peacecorps next year, along with his wife who was also a Sonlight member and is in a master's program in the health field. Joy, Miriam, Wendy, and Lara are all former Sonlight members who are pursuing their love for the arts and have chosen to forego more financially lucrative careers in order to dedicate their lives to their passion. Another instance of someone who has chosen to follow his heart instead of a more normative path is Ric. After completing his AA degree, he worked for a semester, saving money to enable him to travel for six months in Europe with only a bicycle and backpack. Many youth have chosen career paths that are specifically human or service oriented, desiring to help people in need. For example, Kelsey and Evan are both teaching special education, and Hope and Kimberly are both practicing occupational therapy.

The young people mentioned above are just a purposeful sample that I informally created by looking at a list of graduates. Though I am not able to quantify with numbers the proportion of young people who report having changed their future trajectory because of their experience in Sonlight, I can share the stories of a few salient examples: Bart (senior), Max (ninth grader), and Paige (junior).

Bart was the younger brother of a former Sonlight president. He was anxious to join the program as he had a love for music and friends who were involved. Bart had a natural talent for singing and enjoyed the spotlight as a soloist, performing in Sonlight many songs that were by his favorite artists. Though he had regular attendance and was

involved musically during his first two years in the program, it was not until his junior and senior years of high school that Bart took on more responsibility by being a student leader. His senior year he was elected president of the choir and as such, he played a major role in all aspects of the activities. I spoke with Bart just after his graduation from high school. At that time, he was unsure of what he wanted to do with his life. He had been admitted to the University of Florida and had earned a Bright Futures Scholarship. Bart said that he was majoring in computers, though he was not quite sure what he was going to do with his degree–possibly something in technology or maybe computer engineering. Bart explained that to him, being a success was being "happy" and fulfilling his goals–though he was not quite certain what those goals were. After pursuing this degree for two years, Bart realized he was not happy–he knew he did not like his major, but he was not sure what alternative might suit him better. He spent the summer working as a staff member for a service project, and upon his return decided to take a semester off of school. He began coaching high school baseball and football and found great satisfaction and fulfillment in this experience. Bart has now returned to school and is double majoring in physical education and math so that he can coach at the high school level, while earning a living teaching. Bart reports being much happier now. He realizes that though he is not likely to earn as much money with these future goals, he has found something that he truly enjoys doing. Bart has come to realize the effect that his experience in Sonlight had on his life– the value of being a positive figure in the lives of young people. Bart has chosen to forego financial success as a computer engineer in order to be a mentor to youth–encouraging, inspiring, and challenging them both on the field and in the classroom.

I spoke with Max during his first year in both high school and the program. Though he had a love for music and hoped to be an instrumentalist, his lack of seniority

relegated him to minor percussion and back-up parts until the following year when he took over the drum set. As the principle drummer for the choir, he provided the rhythmic foundation for the music they performed; this required a time commitment above and beyond that of a typical member. Max attended the international baccalaureate program, an academically accelerated environment. He also played varsity soccer and was in the drum corps of the school band. At the time of our interview, Max emphasized the importance of career and financial goals. He jokingly responded that he wanted to be a fireman when he grew up, but then seriously stated that he aspired to be a businessman or doctor. Max also stressed the value of having a good family life, being a husband and father. He indicated that he desired to be judged positively by others, considering recognition and respect necessary to be successful, according to his definition. During Max's tenure in Sonlight, the Focus themes included perspective, risk, and connecting with nature. Thus, he was encouraged to think critically with an open mind, risk his dreams, and to be aware of the physical world around him, appreciating its fragility and beauty. Max is now a first year student at Virginia Tech University. Based on his responses during our interview, one might assume that his major was business or pre-med. However, Max has since decided that he values spending time in nature more than financial success and the validation of others. He has chosen to major in International Relations, with a focus on the environment. He is also nurturing his passion for photography. As this dissertation nears completion, Max has just returned from New Mexico, where was selected to shadow a *National Geographic* photographer. Influenced by his experience in Sonlight, learning to think critically about what he values, Max has decided to listen to the beat of his own inner drummer.

Paige's family were members of Trinity UMC. She recalls that she waited with great anticipation as a child in elementary and middle school for the day that she could

join Sonlight. In ninth grade, she was finally eligible to become a member. From her first day at rehearsal, it was clear that Paige was excited to be a part of the program. During her four years in Sonlight, Paige was a member of many of the groups and teams, culminating with her senior year, 2000, when she was selected by the other students to be their president. As previously mentioned, on the surface, Sonlight appears to be primarily a music program of talented young singers. Paige was not a musician. She did not play any musical instrument, nor could she carry a tune. However, like many teenagers, she had a love of music. She enjoyed listening to and participating in the production and performance of some of her favorite songs. Furthermore, Paige took advantage of the non-musical aspects of Sonlight: the fellowship with friends, involvement in activities, and leadership opportunities. Paige often appeared stressed as if she was constantly running. She was captain of the varsity soccer team at her school and was in the honors program. During our interview, Paige said that she often felt significant pressure from her mother and teachers, moreover, she said she felt pressure from the expectations of others as well as her self. She indicated that she was working as hard as she could in order to be accepted into college. At the time of our interview, Paige said being a success meant being happy and content with herself. She continued and explained that her future goals involved helping other people. Though she was not sure what she wanted to do with her life, as far as a career was concerned, she was certain she wanted to get a college education–not so much for professional preparation, but in order to learn about people and to be well rounded. She emphasized the value of being open-minded, sensitive to others, continually learning, and having "soft clay" (a phrase from a Focus given that year). Since graduating from high school in 2000, Paige has worked for Appalachia Service Project building and repairing houses for the impoverished. Currently Paige is in school, majoring in Building Construction. She has

dedicated her life to serving others. The following poem was written by Paige (1999) during the summer before her senior year of high school, not long after Sonlight's Focus theme of Perspective, while preparing for the new year's theme of Risk. She was experiencing stress and feeling pressure to strive to attain certain goals and expectations about which she had begun to think critically. Her participation in the "small world" of Sonlight encouraged her to measure her worth by more than her school performance and achievements, and instead to value her abilities and talents serving others and making a contribution to society.

**I am More**
I am more than my SAT score, than my GPA.
I am more than my dress or social status at school, in my community.
I am more than my skills on the soccer field,
more than any rumor,
more than a clean room and washed dishes.
I am more than a pretty face,
more than a tongue piercing.
I am more than a rejection letter to college.
My name is not 3.6, 1050 - my name is not bad student, lazy, worthless.
My brother is more than...
Premarital sex, he is no sexual predator
and no sinner worse than anyone else.
He is a father, a part of a beautiful little girl
that is showered with love..
He is a hand in the next generation.
He is the future.
I am the future.
I am an individual, I am an outcast, I am separate from my classmates. I am lively, I am friendly, funny, intelligent. I am of worth, I am still nowhere near the pinnacle of my ability, strength, and talents. I am a student. I am an aunt, a sister, a daughter. I am a servant. I am a teacher.
I am loving, I am an object to be loved.
I am not worthless. I am not worthless.
I am strong enough to push through this - determined enough to make a difference, to show I have meaning.
I am more than they see, more than they can know, more than I am.

As illustrated in the poem above, the pressure experienced by Paige and many young people today can be overwhelming. They indicate being under quite a bit of stress, trying to live up to the expectations of their parents, teachers, peers, and "society" portrayed and promoted in the media (Hoover 2002, Pope 2001, Who's Who 1996). Though the prevailing notion in American culture defines adolescence as a period in which a young person is free from the burdens and responsibilities of adulthood, being a teenager today, even one of privilege, is not without difficulties. The image of "success" that most young people are given requires that they attain a college education. Attending college is a more normative experience in recent years than it was in the past, with 60-70% of high school students in the U.S. going on to attend college (Gray 1995, U.S. Bureau for Labor Statistics 2002, American Council on Education 2002). As college enrollment has increased, more young people compete for acceptance, and space is limited. In high school, not only must they have excellent grade point averages, they must score well on standardized exams in addition to being involved in numerous extracurricular activities and displaying extraordinary leadership qualities. The relationship between a college major and a career path is not always articulated. Additionally, questions about how young peoples' education and career paths are influenced by their interests and goals are ignored. Students today may be asked what they want to be when they grow up, but they are rarely asked what they consider to be important–to think critically about their own values and goals.

## Discussion

The significance of Sonlight is that it was effectively a "values education program." As such, I assert the difference between the students I interviewed and those with matching demographics in the MTF sample was a result of their experience in this

youth program. Participating in Sonlight and taking part in the Focus lessons had a dramatic and lasting impact on the young people. Data in both the quantitative and qualitative chapters of this study suggest that the students I interviewed held distinctively different definitions of "being a success" than a probability sample of American teenagers with matching demographics. The ways in which they conceptualized the notion of success reflect their values and goals, emphasizing the importance of philanthropy ("making a contribution to society") and minimizing goals related to careers and finances.

Clearly, the findings of this study indicate that Sonlight was a "small world" in which particular definitions of success were constructed, future goals were examined, and values were emphasized. The teenagers who participated in Sonlight were substantially more likely than the youth in the MTF sample with matching demographics to hold philanthropic values and to discount the importance of financial success. The Focus lessons in Sonlight functioned as a "values curriculum," and when combined with Brown's innovative leadership approach (empowering the youth as leaders), created an environment that allowed young people to explore their future goals and values. Since teenagers today have few, if any, other locations in which to explicitly discuss and examine their goals and values, their experience in Sonlight was particularly valuable[3].

This research offers contributions to social science research, theory, and

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3

Though there is always concern when doing social research about responses and observations being influenced by social desirability and the Hawthorne effect (participants giving responses that are consistent with their perceptions of what the researcher wants to hear), this did not prove to be a major issue in this study. If these issues had significantly affected their responses, there would have been very little variation in their response; for example, they would have all mentioned the director, Brown, as their model of a successful person, when in actuality, only one of the youth I interviewed shared this response.

practice. This study responds to Furstenberg's call for research that utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data, and that addresses the experiences and competencies of youth. Through combining both constructive and interactive approaches, I articulate and apply the notion of "small worlds" to the sociological study of youth, thus adding to the realm of social psychological theory. Future research might investigate the construction of goals and values that takes place in the many other "small worlds" in which young people live and interact. Future research might explore whether a values education program like Sonlight might be able to impact the goals and values of youth of a more diverse and representative population. Finally, the results of this study have practical implications for those who work in applied settings. The field of Youth Development within the discipline of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences is one such potential venue. Coincidentally, the most recent edition of a key journal in the field of Postitive Youth Development features an article entitled, "From Assets to Agents of Change: Social justice, organizing, and youth development" (Ginwright & James 2002). The authors propose a theoretical model for creating youth programs and organizations that promote the value of social justice. The figure below shows the principles, practices, and outcomes potentially offered by such Social Justice Youth Development programs.

| Principles | Practices | Outcomes |
|---|---|---|
| Analyzes power in social relationships | •Political education<br>•Political strategizing<br>•Identifying power holders<br>•Reflecting about power in one's own life | •Social problematizing, critical thinking, asking and answering questions related to community and social problems<br>•Development of sociopolitical awareness<br>•Youth transforming arrangements in public and private institutions by sharing power with adults |
| Makes identity central | •Joining support groups and organization that support identity development<br>•Reading material where one's identity is central and celebrated<br>•Critiquing stereotypes regarding one's identities | •Development of pride regarding one's identity<br>•Awareness of how sociopolitical forces influence identity<br>•Feeling of being a part of something meaningful and productive<br>•The capacity to build solidarity with others who share common struggles and have shared interests |
| Promotes systematic social change | •Working to end social inequality (such as racism and sexism)<br>•Refraining from activities and behaviors that are oppressive to others (for example, refusing to buy shows made in sweatshops) | •Sense of life purpose, empathy for the suffering of others, optimism about social change<br>•Liberation by ending various forms of social oppression |
| Encourages collective action | •Involving oneself in collective action and strategies that challenge and change local and national systems and institutions<br>•Community organizing<br>•Rallies and marches<br>•Boycotts and hunger strikes<br>•Walkouts<br>•Electoral strategies | •Capacity to change personal, community, and social conditions<br>•Empowerment and positive orientation towards life circumstances and events<br>•Healing from personal trauma brought on by oppression |
| Embraces youth culture | •Celebrating youth culture in organizational culture<br>•Language<br>•Personnel<br>•Recruitment strategies | •Authentic youth engagement<br>•Youth-run and youth-led organizations<br>•Effective recruitment strategies<br>•Effective external communications<br>•Engagement of extremely marginalized youth |

Figure 7–*Principles, practices, and outcomes of social justice youth development* (Ginwright & James 2002, 34-35)

Interestingly, Sonlight shared the same five principles (thought articulated a bit differently by the director, Brown, in her own principles statement), and utilized similar practices, leading to many of the same positive outcomes outlined in the table above. Though this dissertation is not a program evaluation of Sonlight, its findings attest to the effectiveness of this youth program to encourage young people to think critically about their values. Sonlight was based on principles that viewed teenagers as active agents and utilized youth culture media (such as popular music) to reach and attract young people. Sonlight's programs were based on a curriculum that specifically challenged dominant notions of "success," instead supporting ideals of making a contribution to society and connecting with others, and it produced outcomes that are consistent with those proposed by the Positive Youth Development scholars. Researchers, educators, and those who work in applied fields might benefit from applying the principles and a similar values curriculum of Sonlight to their own programs.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW

Thank you for agreeing to complete this interview of high-school youth.
I remind you that you do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer.
You may discontinue your participation at any point.

Please rate the following four future goals as to their importance in your life as:
not important- somewhat important- quite important- extremely important.

1. Graduate from college
2. Be a success
3. Make a contribution to society
4. Have lots of money

For the following questions, please do not feel limited to one-sentence responses, share as much as you'd like:

5. What does "be a success" mean to you?

6. In what ways do you personally hope to be successful?

7. Please describe someone (real or made up) who you consider to be an extremely successful individual.

8. Do you feel pressure to be a success? If so, in what ways? pressure from where?

9. How do the expectations of other people affect you? Please give a few examples.

10. Do you think there is a lot of competition in highschool? (Academic, athletics, socially)

11. Is there anything else about the pressure to succeed that you'd like to share?

12. Do you think the experiences of youth today are different from past generations? In what ways?

13. After the Littleton shootings, the newsmedia declared that teenagers today are "morally bankrupt" meaning that you have no values. Do you agree? If not, how would you describe the situation differently?

14. Remember when we were at Columbine Park and Rebecca asked, "Listen, what do you hear from the world you know?" I'm asking you, what do YOU hear from the world YOU know?

15. Is there anything else about being a teenager in America today that you would like to share?

I'll close with some general questions about your background:
16. What is your name?
17. What is your gender?
18. How old are you?
19. What school do you attend and what grade did you just complete?
20. What is your GPA?
21. Do you expect to graduate from college?
22. What do you want to be when you grow up?

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR TIME! If you are interested in the results of this study, they will be available in August. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

APPENDIX B
ORGANIZATION AND LEADERSHIP OF SONLIGHT

**The Organization of this Unconventional Youth Program**

•Sonlight is open to any 9-12 grader in the local area.
-There are no auditions or requirements, nor dues or fees to join.
-About ½ of Sonlight members grew up at Trinity UMC or in a church– that means the other half have little or no exposure to church, or come from a different belief system (Jewish, Buddhist, Agnostic, etc.). Many of these young people have no personal religious affiliation, yet they often express a yearning for a spiritual connection.

•Rehearsals are held every Sunday afternoon (3:30-5:00).
-About one hour is spent on teaching the music (usually 4-6 songs are covered).
-The remainder of the time is spent on the Focus message and announcements.

•Three Sundays a month Sonlight provides the music at the 9:40 service at Trinity.
-The songs are introduced with a Focus by a student, explaining the God-truths we are learning.

•Every fall there is a weekend retreat to Camp Kulaqua and there are two Planning Retreats

•If interested, a youth may do a "Play-in" or "Sing-in" with Rebecca to evaluate their way to contribute to the choir as a singer, soloist, or instrumentalist.
-The sound is entirely student produced– every singer, guitarist, violinist, pianist, drummer, etc. are local high school students... our Sound Techs are even youth!
-Solos and Ensembles for Tour are auditioned, as are most solos throughout the year.

•Youth may choose to participate in a team as an additional way to be involved.
-Many youth are not musically talented, but are gifted in other ways. These Teams provide an opportunity for them to explore their varied talents and interests.
-Officers are selected by each team as their leader.
-The choir elects a President and Vice President each year to represent them.

•The President & Vice President along with the other 10 Team Leaders, are referred to as Officers and they are the core leadership of the choir.
-There are also about 8 youth selected by the Officers to serve as Section Leaders who help with attendance in their section (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass).

•Each year there is a Tour (to destinations such as Boston, New York, New Orleans, Colorado). -90 members are selected based on their Tour Evaluation which is a score made-up of their attendance at rehearsals, level of participation, and seniority.
-Musical talent is not a factor in selecting Tour Participants.
-A "Send Off" Concert is performed to an audience of over 1500 friends, parents, grads,

and fans which commences each Tour. All choir members are welcome to participate, whether or not they are Tour candidates.
•The sound is mixed by the Tech Crew and a professional recording is made of each year's Send Off Concert.
-CDs (and tapes) of this concert are tediously mixed and produced resulting in a high quality CD and tape that is shared with fans all over the country.

**Leadership of the Program**
•Staff consists of Rebecca Brown (Director, full-time) with the assistance of a Grad Team
-The staff are all former Sonlight members (thus called Grad Team) who are currently college students, including 2 secretaries (part time), a musical assistant, and 4 interns.

MEMBERSHIP TEAM
•Cares for the needs of choir members, highlights talents & accomplishments, and helps new members feel welcome.

FOCUS TEAM
•Helps with creative ways to make the Focus (or message) of a song more meaningful to the choir and to the listeners.
•Prepares statements used to introduce songs during performances.

ACTIVITIES TEAM
•Organizes all in-house events and promotes these activities to choir members.

SERVICE TEAM
•Presents viable opportunities for choir members to volunteer and serve the community at local non-profit organizations and missions.

TALENT TEAM
•Utilizes the talents of choir members to enhance understanding of the theme through art, speeches, and writing.

CONCERT TEAM
•Organizes the big performance events of the year like Celebrate Me Home and Send Off Concert. This includes all logistical needs - roadies, tech, and riser crew.

PUBLICITY TEAM
•Organizes all publicity to the community and beyond for Sonlight activities and performances.
•Works to bring about a closer relationship and understanding between the community and Sonlight.

ADMINISTRATIVE CREATIONS TEAM
•Known to less imaginative human beings as "the Office Team."
•Organizes the Sonlight Office, all music, handouts, files and information– weekly.

TECHNOLOGY TEAM
•Maintains the Sonlight web page and sends e-mail messages to the choir at large as needed.

TECH CREW
•Produces Sonlight's sound at all performances and rehearsals.
•Maintains the sound equipment and trains other interested Techies.

FUTURE TEAM
•Explores the possibilities of a Sonlight-type program in the community.

## APPENDIX C
## ARTICLES ABOUT SONLIGHT FROM *THE GAINESVILLE SUN*

Parting Ways- May 26, 2001
http://www.sunone.com/DAYBREAK/articles/2001-05-26son.shtml
http://www.toseethestar.org/portfolio/Partingways_RBPF.pdf

Sonlight Director to Leave Position- January 17, 2001
http://www.sunone.com/articles/2001-01-17f.shtml

A Shining Light for Teens- December 15, 2000
http://www.sunone.com/DAYBREAK/articles/20000-12-17son.html
http://www.toseethestar.org/portfolio/Shininglight_RBPF.pdf

Musicians Celebrate Return to Gainesville- December 20, 1999
http://www.sunone.com/news/articles/12-20-99f.shtml

Lessons from Littleton- June 26, 1999
http://www.sunone.com/daybreak/articles/06-26-99dba.shtml

Taking in Columbine: Gainesville Youth Choir Visits Columbine- June 22, 1999
http://www.sunone.com/news/articles/06-22-99v.shtml

APPENDIX D
ACTIVITIES OF SONLIGHT: 1984 – 2001

**Bridge building**
International: 1993 & 1994, the choir raised the money to bring over two Russian students from Novorosiisk to tour with us. Developed a pen pal relationship with a high school class there, and recorded the rock tune "Wind of Change" (the entire choir learned it in Russian) and mailed it to this class as a gesture of friendship and support.

Racial: 1992-1995 the choir worked on joint projects with the youth from Mt Pleasant UMC (an African American church in town.) Included sleepovers, sports events and a bull session with a former Black Panther turned minister.

Persons living with AIDS: 1993 produced the recording "from Sonlight, With Love" for families of those suffering with AIDS. Songs of love support and understanding. These tapes went out in Christmas baskets to families that Christmas.

Cancer support: In 1992 one of our choir members, Kim Flaitz, was diagnosed with cancer. The choir at that time supported her through letters, journals and visits. Each choir that followed thereafter (92-98) supported her in different ways through 6 more years. Members organized a hospital support group for others like Kim who were teenagers with cancer. Kim died in 98 and the choir was honored to sing at her memorial service. It was an incredible journey for all of us and one which none of us will ever forget.

Community: Organized "Celebrate Me Home", a holiday community event on the Downtown Plaza.. Local rock bands played for 5 hours and Sonlight closed with an hour of holiday and inspirational music (all rock & roll). This event was effective in merging the church with the street and the street with the church. It was a huge success, playing to more than a thousand people on a December Sunday afternoon.

Community – Media: The local newspaper, the Gainesville Sun, did over twenty articles on the choir over the years. Local radio stations KTK and Rock 104 have played Sonlight on the air. The choir performed with local bands like Sister hazel, House of Dreams, and Big Sky and have had their members join us in church on some performance occasions.

Peer Support: We produced a booklet called "the Glow of Something Bright" for distribution in the local high schools after a suicide attempt by a prominent youth. We also reached out to members of Columbine High school through calls and letters of support and concern. We conducted our own candle light memorial after our in-depth focus on pain in our own high schools. At various times over the years a peer hot line was formed, called "Just say Help". Members could request a call by a peer during the week.

**Educational**
Racial: visiting African American speakers and discussions. Intense focus on Dr Brown Luther King Jr. ON tour we arranged for the reenactment of his "I have a dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. We followed with a prayer of repentance for the church's slowness to act during the Civil Rights movement.

Native Americans: Study, discussion on Native American spirituality, participation in pow-wows, created a medicine wheel with spiritual elder, visited a reservation twice. Many projects- building dream catchers and spirit bags, etc. We also studied the two battles at Wounded Knee.

Interfaith: Visited the Rocky Mountain Shambalah Center in 1999 with 120 youth. Group instruction in meditation. Discussion with our own members of other faiths. Focus sources from scriptures of other wisdom traditions (Hindu, Sufi, Taoist, Islam, Native American.)

Literature: Authors like Thoreau, and poets like Emily Dickinson were frequently used as focus sources.

War: In particular the Vietnam War. Focus developed around Billy Joel's song "Good night Saigon", and discussion with Nam vets.

Heritage/History: We learned our individual immigration stories and visited Ellis Island during our Risk a Dream focus.

Nature/Environment: numerous themes touched on the ecological concerns of our times. More than once we planned a walk down a country road for the tranquility and perspective it yielded. Two years have been devoted exclusively to a Nature theme (96 & 2001)

Christian Service: the choir regularly engaged in service projects but we also learned by visiting and learning from people in ministry. We have met & worked with the homeless shelters in town. On the 2000 tour we visited college students living in community in inner-city Philadelphia to work with the poor there. We sought to understand why 8 college students with college degrees would choose this for a career – and learned...

Thematic: There was a library reading list on the year's theme for those who wanted to explore it further. The focus team created a library for choir members who wanted to check-out books related to the theme. Each focus was an education for all of us as we explored a theme in depth for a year.

**Service**
Members worked on regular local needs as they were known- from painting a house, to singing in a nursing home or a Juvenile Detention center or passing out sandwiches in Central Park. Some members developed an after-school tutoring program. Other worked regularly with the local AIDS network. Each year there was a "Service Team" for those who wanted to take service to a higher level.

APPENDIX E - A SONLIGHT FOCUS

***Convictions or Post-it Notes?*** (By Rebecca Brown)

It is interesting to ponder how it is we learn. There is this emphasis lately on hands-on learning, and I think it is because we realize that a lot of what we are taught does not really stick with us. I took French in high school and German in college, but Norwegian is all I can remember - and I learned that by accident during a month's stay in Norway with a friend. To really absorb something, we seem to need to experience it. It's like the difference between reading the Cliff's Notes to Farewell to Arms and truly experiencing Hemingway. The Cliff's Notes can tell me he meets the nurse and falls in love, but the words of Hemingway actually put me in the room with them.

It only gets more confusing when you think about how we learn faith. In some ways, religious education is like reading the Cliff Notes on what is innately internal and personal. Sting says, "Let your soul be your pilot," and "Take me to the pilot of your soul," calls Elton John. How then could we expect something as weighty as the soul to be piloted by Cliff's Notes?

The way I see it, much of what we learn about anything merely gets tacked on us like post-it notes: Jesus died for my sins. He rose again on the third day. I will love the Gators. We vote Republican. The average teenager is a walking "post-it tree." Of course, some of us feel like raging intellectuals because we've ripped off the yellow post-it to put on a pink one, and actually pride ourselves on our individuality! When I turned 18, I registered Democrat because my dad was a Republican. It took me eight more years figure out what either meant. Pink or yellow, it's still just a post-it.

We parents are proud of the training we've given our kids. When it's time to let them go, we spin them around three times, point them in the right direction and hope they read their post-it notes. But the first good wind in college blows most of them off - but not all. There are always a few notes that were unknowingly sewn in to the fiber of their soul. These post-its may have come from you, mom and dad, but not the stitches.

Sometimes you've got to lost your "post-it faith" to find the internal convictions that won't fly off in the wind. It may be oh so small - one lonely, little piece of faith sewn into your heart - but it's yours. It might be the size of a mustard seed, but you start with that because what you grow from there will be real and will stick with you.

Adolescence and young adulthood is the natural time to inventory your post-its. If you've been raised to "believe," you need to question it. It you've been raised agnostic or atheist, you need to question that. Post-it notes get very comfortable. There is some security in wearing them. They make us feel as if we know what we think. I've watched many a youth dash off to college, post-its flying off in the wind, only to see them again in ten years with all of them tacked back neatly in place. They are a lot easier to own then convictions. Convictions involve a needle and thread and sometimes pain. I think there

is nothing sadder than to meet an adult clutching their post-it notes against the wind of time and change.

Integral to faith is doubt. Integral to learning is experience. Look, touch, wonder. Henry David Thoreau said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." He said that he went to the woods because he didn't want to get to the end of his life and realize he had never lived... or that the only convictions he ever owned were post-it notes?

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kristin E. Joos is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology and the Center for Women's Studies and Gender Research at the University of Florida. Her major areas of focus are Social Psychology and Families and Gender. She received a Master of Arts degree in Sociology from the University of Florida in 1999 and a Bachelor of Science with a major of Psychology and minors of Sociology, Women's and Gender Studies, and Religion from the University of Florida in 1998.

Kristin was born and grew up in Gainesville. She likes the youth and progressive culture of this college town and loves living in the duckpond neighborhood where she can leave her windows open nine months a year, as long as temperatures are over 86 degrees.

Kristin enjoys playing many roles: daughter, sister, friend, graduate student, college instructor, researcher, tutor, certified pilates instructor, activist, feminist, pluralist, and human being.

Her research interests center around youth, issues of identity, and social change. She is not yet certain "what she wants to be when she grows up," nor how she defines "success." If she was forced to articulate a definition she would say something like this quote, often incorrectly attributed to Emerson:

> To laugh often and much;
> to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children;
> to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the
> betrayal of false friends;
> to appreciate beauty, to find the best in others;
> to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a
> garden patch, or a redeemed social condition;
> to know even one life has breathed easier because you
> have lived.
> This is to have succeeded.

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Constance L. Shehan, Chair
Professor of Sociology

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Insurance, and Real Estate

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the department of Sociology in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

May 2003

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